

Adults in Higher Education

“I am not here as a suppliant for my class. I decline to sit at the rich man’s gate praying for crumbs. I claim for my class all the best that Oxford has to give”. (J M Mactavish, Portsmouth dockyard worker and trade unionist, Oxford Conference, 1907)

This briefing sheet outlines adult participation in UK higher education, from its early beginnings to recent developments, and within changing political and social contexts. Particular emphasis is given to the work NIACE is doing to promote and support adults in higher education in the current political climate of emphasis on participation by the 18-30 age cohort.

Now that the age of majority in the UK is 18, all students at higher education institutions (HEIs) are by technical definition adults. None the less, ‘adult’ in this context implies a return to learning after a break from initial education, for a range of possible reasons: for example, professional training, updating of skills, retraining for a change of career; ‘second chance’ education; or undertaking higher education in retirement.

Higher education (HE) can be defined as study at university level. As part of initial education it follows sixth form or further education, while increasingly adults pursue HE mid-career - for professional development and training - or in retirement. HE courses are undergraduate (leading typically to BA or BSc degrees) or postgraduate (e.g. MA, MSc or PhD). Programmes can be full or part time, and studied on a university or college campus or by distance learning, as in the Open University.

Higher education in the UK is delivered by universities and specialist HE colleges (approximately 160), and some further education colleges (approximately 175). About 45% of young adults in England now enrol for HE programmes (more in Scotland). Each of the four UK countries – England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland – has its own funding council, allocating Government funding to the sector. Undergraduate fees are typically £1,150 for European Union students; the sector increasingly recruits worldwide.

Historical note

Adult education in universities began in the 1790s in Scotland and in 1867 in England, when James Stuart, a Cambridge mathematician, delivered a lecture series to working class women in northern cities. This began the university extension movement, which after the First World War became an organised

system of 'extra mural' education, universities being publicly funded to deliver 'outreach' programmes of courses to the communities of a designated region. In the early 20th century a corresponding movement for what is handily if inelegantly called 'inreach' – access to university education for those previously excluded began with the foundation of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) (see Mactavish quotation above).

Recent history

The dominant feature of UK higher education in the last half century has been its expansion from an elite to a mass system. This process can be exemplified by the increase in the number of HEIs – from about 40 to about 120, to which can be added many further education colleges funded to provide HE programmes. Participation has risen from 7% to over 40% in the same period. This expansion had two main phases – first, that following the Robbins Report in 1963, and later after the incorporation of polytechnics into the university sector in 1992.

Polytechnics had developed from colleges for vocational provision linked strongly to local employment training needs and funded through local government. This dual HE sector of universities and polytechnics, unhelpfully separated by the so-called 'binary line' was unified by the granting of university status to all polytechnics.

From the point of view of adult learning, the two sides of the old binary sector have retained many of their historical characteristics. Pre-1992 universities mostly had specialist units providing adult programmes for the local and regional community; the ex-polytechnics maintained their historical character of adult learning being institution-wide and not within one department or centre.

Recent developments

The expansion of the system has not been matched by equivalent increases in public funding. This has resulted in significant pressures and changes. The pressure has been to create income from non-Treasury sources – especially links with business for the commercialising of knowledge, and the offering of profit-making programmes of professional development. Recruitment drives for overseas students, whose fees are not capped as are those for European Union students, have been another feature. The Higher Education Act 2004 allows for the introduction of variable top up fees to a ceiling of £3,000 p.a.

Over the last decade another feature has been the widening participation movement, with Government policy applying funding levers to universities to admit a more socially inclusive range of students. The latest manifestation of this is the Labour Government's current policy of encouraging 50% of school-leavers and young adults into HE, together with a further drive for social equity for non-traditional sections of the community, currently through a large awareness and aspiration-raising programme: *Aimhigher*.

Promoting the interests of adults in higher education: what is NIACE doing?

This drive for participation by young people has had the unintended consequence of partially eclipsing adult participation in HE. Combating this is a central focus of current NIACE activity. The 2004 Higher Education Act, following the White Paper (2003) unintentionally, but none the less damagingly, missed the chance to remove the existing disadvantage to adults, especially in the treatment of part-time HE, which is

mostly an adult mode. Lobbying, discussing with politicians, civil servants and the sector have been applied to seek a fair deal for adults. The impact on part-time students of increased top-up fees from 2006 is another area of concern which NIACE has been addressing.

Another worrying development for the adult agenda is the steady erosion of the civil and personal development oriented adult education provision especially of the pre-1992 universities, and the closure of centres for continuing education. NIACE works closely with its sister organisations, the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL) and the Forum for Adult and Continuing Education (FACE) in campaigning for adult access to HE programmes.

Adult students are by definition likely to need HE provision that is local to their homes. This depends therefore on local and regional structures for progression and lifelong learning. The very recent development by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), together with funding partners, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), of Lifelong Learning Networks - regional collaboration for lifelong learning - is of great interest to NIACE in its support of adult opportunity and access. The networks are being encouraged to develop organically according to the circumstances of their hinterland, with the resulting structures embodying much local variation. NIACE is working with HEFCE on a project to track, support and disseminate these developments.

The 'binary divide' between polytechnics and universities, abolished in 1992, has reasserted itself in some ways now that the further education sector is heavily engaged in the provision of higher education programmes, approximately 11% of all HE provision. This includes the new two-year Foundation Degree, a vocationally-oriented degree developed with employers as well as academics, which offers the entitlement to 'top up' to an honours degree at a university. The importance of local provision for adults, especially those from traditionally non-participating social groups, highlights the need for significant HE programmes in local FE colleges.

This new FE/HE split again unhelpfully divides higher education into two sectors, with articulation and thus student FE/HE progression made more difficult as a result. NIACE's FE/HE team is working to support the introduction of the concept of tertiary education to cover all post-school public sector learning – a concept demonstrably effective in other countries, and under development in the UK outside England – Scotland, for example has merged not only the FE and HE funding bodies but also the actual funding.

Other issues of campaigning interest include the evolution and impact of the National Qualifications (NQF) framework on student progression opportunities, the development of effective Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Accreditation of Prior (Experiential) Learning AP(E)L, and work-based learning (WBL), and the adaptation of curriculum to suit the more diverse cultures and clienteles of adult higher education.

NIACE contacts

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Other useful contacts

Forum for the Advancement of Continuing Education (FACE)

University of East London
Romford Road
London, E15 4LZ
Tel: 020 8223 4936
Website: www.f-a-c-e.org.uk
UK wide network for all those involved with continuing education and lifelong learning.

Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP)

Woburn House
20 Tavistock Square
London, WC1H 9HB
Tel: 020 7387 7711
Website: www.scop.ac.uk
Representative body for higher education colleges in England and Northern Ireland.

Standing Conference on the Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults (SCUTREA)

Centre for Lifelong Learning
University of Warwick
Coventry, CV4 7AL
Tel: 024 7652 3787
Website: www.scutrea.ac.uk
SCUTREA is the national research association.

Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL)

2nd Floor, Renaissance House
20 Princess Road West
Leicester, LE1 6TP
Tel: 0116 285 9702
Website: www.uace.org.uk
National body representing the interests of the continuing education/lifelong learning community within higher education.

Universities UK (UUK)

Woburn House
20 Tavistock Square
London, WC1H 9HQ
Tel: 020 7419 4111
Website: www.universitiesuk.ac.uk
The national association of universities.

University Continuing Education Association (UCEA)

One Dupont Circle
Suite 615
Washington, DC 20036
Website: www.ucea.edu
UCEA is the American national association.

References and useful resources

Annual report and yearbook 2003/4. Universities Association for Lifelong Learning, 2005.

Closing the equity gap: the impact of widening participation strategies in the UK and the USA. Edited by Geoff Layer. NIACE, 2005. ISBN: 1862012369. £18.95

Lifelong learning and the university: a post-Dearing agenda. David Watson and Richard Taylor. Falmer, 1998. ISBN: 0750707844. £24.99

The tertiary moment: what road to inclusive higher education? - a NIACE policy discussion paper. Edited by Chris Duke. NIACE, 2005. ISBN: 1862012350. £14.95

This is the sixty-first in a series of briefing sheets, which aim to provide an introduction to a variety of lifelong learning issues. Many earlier titles in the series are still available including:

60. Sources of funding for learning for older people
59. Skills for life teaching qualifications framework
58. Dyslexia
57. Mailgroups
56. What is online learning?
55. How do I become a teacher of adults?
54. Mobile ICT resources of older learners

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They are also available on the website at: www.niace.org.uk/information

NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training. It aims to do this for those who do not have easy access because of barriers of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties, or insufficient resources. Registered charity number 1002775; Company registration number 2603322.