

A foot in the door of an uncertain future

Browne's recognition of the importance of fair treatment for part-time students is welcome – but with university lifelong learning ravaged by the withdrawal of funding for equivalent or lower qualifications, and part-time fees set to rise steeply, the future for part-time study remains uncertain, writes **BILL JONES**

The infamous equivalent or lower qualifications (ELQs) regulation – the withdrawal of funding from students who have previously gained a higher education qualification – has cast a long shadow over adult continuing education in English higher education since its introduction in 2007. Together with the attack on funded adult provision in local authorities and further education, and the reductions in provision by the Workers' Educational Association, this policy has had a devastating effect on public adult education provision by universities, leaving whole swathes of the country devoid of opportunity for adults wishing to take early steps into personal academic development, to re-train for a changing career, or to keep active and, therefore, healthy in retirement.

Even by the standards of a service accustomed to threats from the intended – and sometimes unintended – consequences of illiberal policymaking, the ELQ decision came as a shock. Consultation before the decision was rudimentary, despite the fact that this policy represented a departure from principle: for the first time, it was a conscious decision to disadvantage one constituency of learners to fund provision for another. All attempts to divert the policy were met by intransigence; the only negotiation would be on the details of implementation. The disapproval of a select committee was bullishly ignored. It was in this climate that I described the withdrawal of funding for ELQs as a 'perfect storm' for the university lifelong learning community (*Adults Learning*, Volume 20, Number 8, 2009). It must also be remembered that the baleful effects of the ELQ rule stretched beyond continuing education departments to all areas of the university: 50 per cent of the



lost funded student numbers were in other departments and faculties, many of them in programmes offering vocational skills-based training.

Looking back now, under a different government, how did the HE lifelong learning providers weather this hostile climate? Did the 'perfect storm' justify my foreboding? The answer to that question is, I fear, that it did. University lifelong learning centres were, in many cases, already feeling the effects of other and more gradual erosions:

institutional restructurings, pressures to develop vocational continuing professional development (CPD) at the expense of public programmes, withdrawal from regional towns, loss of academic staff. For some, the ELQ policy was the proverbial last straw leading directly to closure; for others, only rapid realignment of programmes towards the vocational, or towards recruitment of young students, saved them from extinction. In all cases, public programmes in academic disciplines, populated by adult students with

a wide range of motives from re-training and re-skilling to revisiting academic personal study after a long working career, have been greatly reduced.

Informal enquiries across the remaining university lifelong learning centres provide clear evidence of the damage caused by the ELQ funding cuts. As predicted, not only are students with previous HE experience denied affordable education, but the reduction in fundable numbers has meant that courses have become non-viable for first-time students as well. One university head of continuing education reports:

The primary impact has been the withdrawal of the traditional liberal adult education programme of termly courses. This was a matter of great regret since we had been one of very few universities to keep such an offering, but with fewer than half the students fundable there was really no choice. If we hadn't sacrificed that, the danger was that the university might have taken more drastic measures. It is worth pointing out, of course, that this decision – forced on us by the ELQ policy – has actually resulted in opportunities being denied to those who don't have any HE experience (40 per cent or so of those who took an Open Studies course).

And another:

Adult education has almost gone; our once large rural programme has gone. Yet we scored very well in the national student survey.

Another university reports:

The ELQ policy has put a strain on our financial position which we are working hard to recoup. We have had to put the fees up substantially, and I have a feeling that we have still not completed that process. Our undergraduate numbers are lower this year. It is difficult to say how much the increase in fees has contributed compared with the recession, but it would be surprising if it were not a combination of both. Those courses still running in our certificated programme are significantly smaller in number this year.

These are from universities where, despite reductions in provision, finance and, inevitably, staff, the programmes are surviving. Others – Lancaster and Reading, for example – have been closed.

Damage from the ELQ policy is not confined to specific programmes where a high proportion of students are ineligible. In any lifelong learning culture, education is a continuum, in which learners can progress as their aspirations and confidence develop.

The destruction of a rung in this progression ladder will starve the next levels of recruits. Public adult programmes have been feeders to more advanced study – part-time evening undergraduate and postgraduate degrees – and these are now often at risk.

The impact of the ELQ policy varies according to subject area. Archaeology has long been a very popular discipline, in which students' work can make genuine contributions to knowledge. The Council for British Archaeology conducted research into the decline of university provision, and a major factor in the serious decline in courses was identified as the ELQ rule. In the universities with archaeology in their continuing education programmes the proportion of students affected by the ELQ regulations, across all subjects, was on average over 50 per cent:

The cuts in ELQ funding for universities tops the list of concerns for the future of continuing education, such is its current detrimental effect ... The effects of the government-imposed ELQ cuts have been extremely severe. (Richard Lee, *Engaging with the Historic Environment: Continuing Education*, Council for British Archaeology, 2009)

The intransigence of ministers at the time of the ELQ policy surprised even the most sceptical of adult educators. During the General Election campaigns there was hardly a mention of ELQs, and the advent of the coalition, especially in a bleak funding climate, did not raise any hopes of a reversal of policy in this respect. The publication of the Browne review has borne out the expectations of fee increases. What Browne would say about part-time HE was, for many of us, crucial, and it was with some surprise and considerable pleasure that very early in a radio interview on the morning of publication, we heard Browne volunteer the importance of fair treatment for part-time students. Much is to be discussed and the proposals have yet to be ratified, but there is a significant measure of recognition of the reality of part-time HE.

A word search in the Browne review on 'ELQ' reveals nothing; it is thus with great interest that we find, tucked away late in the document:

Our proposals also create the potential for Government to review the restrictions on access to funding to students who are studying for a second degree. The ability to re-train will be increasingly important in a changing economy. As more students will pay back the costs of learning in full in our proposals, access to upfront support for the costs of learning could be expanded. (Para 5.5)

This clear reference to the ELQ rule and the acknowledgement of at least one of its

inequities is, in the present climate – and bearing in mind the flat refusal of such acknowledgement by the previous government – a notable advance; a toe in a door which must, in the best pushy sales tradition, be kept firmly ajar.

But there is no cause for triumphalism. Much continuing education provision has already disappeared, and the vital organs of provision – departments, the experienced staff, the public expectations – have, in many cases, been lost. The Browne review's central proposal – the effective doubling (at least) of student fees – will have the inevitable consequence of increasing fees for part-time students.

But there is a further concern. When variable ('top up') fees were introduced in 2006 there was the same fear – that part-time fees would increase *pro-rata*. But, against many expectations, most universities did not, in fact, increase their (always unregulated) part-time fees to match the full-time equivalent. This was, in part, so as not to destroy a market where students had no access to loans but had to pay fees up-front, and also a recognition that many part-time students are from non-traditional backgrounds or taking tentative first steps into higher education. But if Browne is implemented, then, for the first time, part-time students will have access to the same fee support and repayment as their full-time fellows. There will thus be little incentive for universities to offer the same concessions, but to apply *pro rata* the full fee.

Part-time students are not just full-timers doing it more slowly. There are many and varied influences on lives in which, by definition, study is just one part. It is proposed that those studying for 33 per cent or more have access to the same financial support as full-timers. This is a step towards equity and a principle to be applauded. Nevertheless, there are two aspects to be watched with vigilance. The first is that the older the student, the less career advantage flows from graduate status, and, consequently, the less is the acceptability of further and substantial debt beyond existing financial commitments of mortgage and family. Second, as the Higher Education Policy Institute analysis warns, there is 'the strong implication ... that the fees that part-timers pay will need to be the same, *pro rata*, as full timers'. And if fees do rise *pro rata*, then what survives of open access public higher education courses of 10 to 30 credits has a bleak future indeed.

Therefore, despite this in-principle step towards equity, the prospects for many part-time students are fraught with uncertainty as fees rise steeply and teaching funding is cut. The foot may be in the ELQ door, but it might open to reveal an empty room.

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