

Serial number 0196
r
Title Adult learners enrich university communities but there are still far too few of them (Les Ebdon, 2016)
Submitter Ms. Wendy Fowle, Dr. John Butcher

Adult learners enrich university communities but there are still far too few of them (Les Ebdon. 2016)

In England, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) has encouraged Institutions of Higher Education (HEIs) to target resources at widening the participation of adult learners¹:

All institutions have a responsibility to consider how they might work to support part-time and mature learners...you should consider the different barriers mature learners may face in accessing, succeeding in, and progressing from higher education (Office for Fair Access, 2017).

OFFA's focus is particularly pressing. Adult learners are disproportionately likely to be from disadvantaged or under-represented groups and given that most part-time learners are adults (Butcher, 2015) the dramatic (61%) decline in the numbers of mature learners in HE since 2010 (HESA, 2016) which shows no sign of levelling off, is of major concern. However, adult learners are a heterogeneous group and reaching them is not easy, especially those potential students who may face multiple forms of disadvantage.

OFFA funded a research project 'exploring the impact of the evaluation of outreach for adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds' to stimulate an increase in sector outreach targeted at adults. It sought to offer evidence of interventions which attract adult learners into HE, and aimed to provide universities with ideas with which to re-balance their current substantive efforts to widen participation solely through outreach with pupils in schools. In addition, a three-step evaluation tool was developed to support HEIs who may wish to understand how they can better support adult learners, and who wish to evaluate the impact of that activity.

Five institutional case studies across four university partners were developed. The project was led by the Open University in partnership with the University of Leeds, University of Bristol and Birkbeck University of London.

The Open University explored with part-time adult distance learners and their tutors the extent to which a Science, maths and technology (STEM) Access module prepares students to succeed in undergraduate (UG) science. Findings indicate alignment with a number of more generic studentship findings around learner confidence and study management skills, but also uncovered STEM-specific findings around the fundamental importance of enhanced competence in number skills, as well as the positive impact of interdisciplinary learning in entry level STEM.

The University of Bristol explored community-based outreach with adults lacking conventional qualifications, to whom university (and/or a particular institution) might seem inaccessible or 'invisible'. Findings highlight the financial pressures faced by disadvantaged adult learners moving from a lower (Foundation) fee to a full (undergraduate) fee. Other issues include: questions of 'belonging' at the institution and feelings of being an outsider/imposter; the importance of the

¹ Adult and mature learners are often used interchangeably in the literature. For the purposes of this report adult and mature learners are those learners of 25 years or older acknowledging that the needs of a 25 year old adult learner may be different from a 50 year learner.

content of the Foundation Year and its relationship to students' prior experiences; the geography of Bristol and ways in which the university itself interacts with class and race.

Birkbeck University of London focused on the transition of students on a social sciences pathway on an access style programme in HE (Higher Education Introductory Studies, or HEIS) to the BSc in Social Sciences. Findings point to the success of HEIS as a point of access to HE for mature, disadvantaged students, and it appears the programme is reasonably successful in preparing students for their ongoing study on the degree programme. However, more disturbing is the significant drop in numbers enrolling on the programme and a potentially shifting student demographic in terms of income, since the introduction of increased fees by the government in 2012/13.

The University of Leeds' case study explored the experience of participants' involvement in the adult outreach activity offered by the University. Themes emerging indicate:

- importance of Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) and the lack of such provision;
- randomness of opportunities available for adults from WP backgrounds to have progression opportunities;
- more participation in outreach activity = more likely progression;
- positive impact of pre-entry activity on preparedness for HE study,
- peer group support amongst adults from similar backgrounds,
- developing sense of belonging and identity.

The Open University also reported on a recent project funded by HEFCE's National Network for Collaborative Outreach (NNCO) scheme which developed a sustainable approach to adult outreach through the production of new free online resources dedicated to adult learners, on low or no income, looking to upskill or reskill to improve career and life prospects. These included the PEARL website (Part-time Education for Adults Returning to Learn), and six new free online courses for those seeking progression or a new career within specific areas of activity.

Three underlying principles emerged from the case studies which informed the development of an iterative three-step evaluation tool to stimulate and monitor the impact of university outreach activity with adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds (ALDBs).

1. Institutional culture, a willingness to take the needs of adult learners seriously (institutional advocacy).
2. Institutional understanding of the diverse needs of (usually) local adult learners (institutional intelligence).
3. Practical commitment to analysing the impact of any interventions aimed at adult learners through the perceptions of the learners themselves (personalised understanding of impact).

We will facilitate a roundtable discussion based on findings from the OFFA funded research project. After briefly introducing the purpose of the project, headline findings will be presented from each of five case studies. Three questions will be addressed in the substantive part of the roundtable to explore the challenges facing institutions in terms of access to higher education (HE) for adult learners, and to share examples of good practice. This will be achieved through the engagement with the three-step evaluation tool developed as part of the OFFA project (Butcher and Fowle, 2017).

Prompt questions:

Institutional advantages in attracting more adult learners?

Institutional barriers facing adult learners?

Potential use of evaluation tool to support institutional decision-making?

References

Butcher, J. (2015) *"Shoe-horned and side-lined"?: Challenges for part-time learners in the new HE landscape* | Higher Education Academy. Retrieved from <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resource/shoe-horned-and-side-lined-challenges-part-time-learners-new-he-landscape>

HESA (2016) Free statistics online - HESA - Higher Education Statistics Agency. Retrieved June 13, 2016, from <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/free-statistics>

Office for Fair Access (OfFA) (2017) OFFA Annual access agreement and monitoring guidance - OFFA. Retrieved April 11, 2017, from <https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/annual-guidance/>