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Reconceptualising part-time adult learning in higher education (0315)

John Butcher¹*The Open University, UK, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom*

Over 40 years ago, Challis (1976), drawing attention to the experience of mature students in higher education in England noted a depressingly relevant concern: that HE literature assumes undergraduates are single, are unfamiliar with employment, and are aged 18-22. He laments the assumption that the world of students is a young world:

‘Handbooks of advice for new students may classify their contents under headings of ‘Sex’ or ‘Managing money’, but the sections are unlikely to refer to the difficulties of maintaining a marriage or paying a mortgage.’ (209)

None of the changes needed to challenge these assumptions, and to better meet the needs of adult learners in HE in England, are new. Cropley & Knapper (1983) argued that universities have to change if learners are to develop the skills and attitudes for lifelong learning. 30 years ago, Tight (1987) argued that part-time HE was seriously undervalued in this country, despite the UK having a long tradition of delivering part-time HE to students who are in employment, or who have personal commitments which preclude them attending full-time. More recent advocates of flexible pedagogies in HE (Barnett, 2014, Ryan & Tilbury, 2013) make proposals that could revitalise approaches to study for adult learners in part-time HE, including the transformative potential of learner empowerment, and the crossing of boundaries from informal to formal learning.

Problem with the current conceptualisation

A long-established conceptualisation of adult learning (see Blair & McPake, 1995) has focussed on individual psychological drivers for engagement in studying. These have run parallel to theories which suggest critical adult life transitions prompt engagement with learning. These conceptualisations are attributed to data from the 1960s through to the 1990s when adult participation in learning outside and inside universities was buoyant. In the last 20 years, a framework has evolved in which Widening Participation and Access to HE initiatives have co-existed (not always comfortably) with a government agenda around skills development and economic growth. Both have been positioned as dominant discourses to the virtual exclusion of more traditional conceptualisations of transformative adult education (Calleja, 2014) and individual empowerment and agency.

The imbalance between policy drivers, institutional practice and personal need, at a time when withdrawal of employer support for part-time adult learning has proliferated (Butcher, 2015a), has resulted in a dysfunctional system: a mismatch between what older learners might need to succeed in HE, and a lack of flexibility in university approaches (including pedagogy, support systems, assessment, timetabling). Evidence of this ‘broken’ sector can be seen in the 61% decline in part-time students registering for undergraduate study in England in the last decade (HESA, 1997). In fact, policy changes in England over that period (see Marr & Butcher, 2018, in press) have created a ‘perfect storm’ in which the potential disappearance of adult part-time learners from English universities is a distinct possibility. Situated at the centre of a policy/practice/participation tension, the conceptualisation of part-time adult learning is unfit for purpose:

1. WP/Widening Access and Success policies are embedded in taken-for granted assumptions about HE being driven by a social mobility agenda infatuated with 18 year-olds accessing

selective universities. As a result, institutional practices/activities are inadequate to stem the haemorrhaging of part-time adult students, disproportionately affecting the most disadvantaged groups – especially adults (usually women) juggling poorly paid work with caring responsibilities who need part-time study.

2. Prioritising the employability agenda makes little sense for part-time adult learners who are likely to already be employed, and who, rather than needing to develop graduate employability skills, actually crave the financial support to provide study time (and cushion the fees) for self-initiating their engagement with HE.

As a result, the traditional adult education conceptualisation of personal transformation associated with learners (who missed out at 18), seeking through their own sense of agency, to return to education after a significant gap, is 'drowned-out' by the 'noise' of both dominant conceptualisations above. Opportunities for part-time adult learners to engage in HE have been severely weakened by funding changes which make part-time HE look expensive and a risky personal investment. Empirical data (Butcher, 2015a, 2015b, Butcher & Rose-Adams, 2015) suggests HEIs are insufficiently flexible to provide a high quality, affordable, attractive offer to meet part-time adult learner needs.

Proposed re-conceptualisation

Institutional practice needs to be re-adjusted, to encourage a 'climate' in which all learners (including part-time adults) can flourish. A more personalised conceptualisation of participation in HE, which encompasses part-time opportunities for adult learners, could 'normalise' participation for the one disadvantaged group (adults) which has substantially narrowed in recent years. A far more accessible HE system with guided pathways could mitigate concerns that part-time adults too often have to fit into existing structures which were never designed for them – and hence act as barriers to a successful HE experience.

Findings from the OFFA project (2017) identified a number of ways forward to enable this 'climate' to be embedded more widely.

- Reconceptualise university outreach to include taster and preparatory curricula providing a low-risk first step into HE, addressing fear of debt, and anxiety that the personal 'investment' will not pay-off
- Re-position universities in relation to their local communities – taking the HE to where the part-time adult students are rather than expecting them to overcome countless obstacles to come to them (thus addressing lack of confidence and social disapproval from peers)
- Develop more inclusive pedagogies, assessment systems, timetabling and support models, inclusive of all learners not just traditional full-time 18 year olds.
- Support adult student role models from those under-represented groups HEIs are seeking to engage, to mitigate isolation, lack of adult student community and anxiety about 'imposter syndrome'
- Listen to adult part-time learners, who face a 'Hobson's choice' in perceiving full-time HE as inaccessible when juggling work and/or caring.

Conclusion

Re-conceptualising part-time adult learning in HE could incentivise more flexible approaches – the Diamond Review in Wales offers one way forward. Higher level apprenticeships may help a few, but policy and practice needs to be smarter, more inclusive, and bolder.

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