

I'm delighted to be with you this morning, to continue the very robust and constructive conversation that we've been having through this series of seminars across the four nations on widening participation.

I think there is a real consensus across the sector that – despite ongoing instability and uncertainty – that there are some challenges in higher education that remain absolutely critical. Widening participation is definitely one of those vital issues.

If we are serious about enhancing our global competitiveness and increasing skill levels; about promoting social mobility and greater social cohesion, then a real commitment to widening participation has to be at the heart of higher education policy making and institutional practice across all 4 Nations.

With that in mind, it is really useful to have this latest contribution from OFFA, drawing out some of the principles of 'what works' in reaching and engaging adult learners in higher education.

Because we know that all too often that public debate and the policy focus – both on higher education generally, and on widening participation in particular – is based around a limited idea of who students are, and what university education looks like.

Of course, it's absolutely right that every young person with the talent and determination to succeed should have a fair chance of going to university at eighteen.

The expansion of higher education over recent years, as well as genuine, often very effective, efforts to widen participation have helped make enormous strides in narrowing entrenched inequalities.

Yet the focus cannot just be on young people and on full-time students, nor simply on getting particular groups into highly selective universities.

Widening participation must be far more fundamental and far-reaching than that. And part-time provision has to be a huge part of the answer.

Because we know that a disproportionate number of part-time students come from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

And that for many people in Britain, part-time study is the only way to access higher education.

For many of those who are working, those with children, those with particular disabilities or with mental health issues, full-time study simply isn't an option.

If they don't study part-time, they don't study at all.

And we can ill afford the waste of potential and talent that represents.

The challenges posed by Brexit – which is only going to increase the already hugely significant demand for skilled home-grown workers – makes the need for investment in education, training and learning in all its forms ever more urgent.

And enabling those already in the workforce to improve their skill set, to gain new skills or to retrain entirely – making lifelong learning a genuine reality – is absolutely critical to meeting this challenge.

But we can't do that if we rely solely on traditional, full-time, three-year degrees away from home.

Instead, we need to guarantee thriving and diverse forms of learning: equipping people with the skills they want, that employers prize, and that the economy needs – from basic literacy to advanced degrees.

We need to ensure that part-time learning is recognised and appreciated as equally significant and valuable as full-time study.

And we need to proactively reach out to all those adults who are thinking about how to get back into work, or to change career, or to grasp a second chance, but don't know how to begin.

As OFFA reported last week, not only does the number of mature part-time students continue to fall in England, there's also been a worrying climb in the number of young disadvantaged students dropping out of university once they get there. Evidently there's important work to be done on both recruitment and retention rates.

So at the Open University, we absolutely share OFFA's concern because every prospective student who decides that ultimately, they just can't make it work represents a missed opportunity. A chance to change their life, to improve their family's prospects, to improve their employer's turnover, to make a bigger contribution to their community – all gone to waste.

So today I want to argue that widening participation and strengthening part-time provision aren't separate agendas: they are two sides of the same coin.

As the report suggests, adult learning needs to be understood as integral to widening participation – not as something extra.

And I think there are some really useful points here which underline just how critical and inseparable these issues are.

First, there is an important reminder here about the diversity of adult learners.

As this report states, we can't think of learners over twenty-five as a homogenous group. They often have distinctive motivations for learning. They face a complex and overlapping set of challenges. And they have very specific individual needs.

Research that we conducted with the Higher Education Authority has given us important insights into the barriers that adult learners face.

We found, for example, that around half of mature students have caring responsibilities – and that includes more than one in ten who are caring for elderly relatives rather than children.

One in five report a health concerns or disability, meaning that many are juggling doctors' appointments, managing with limited mobility, or coping with depression, anxiety or other mental health conditions.

The vast majority are working while studying, with all the pressures of competing demands that brings.

Crucially for widening participation, a significant proportion are the first in their family to go to university – meaning they may lack access to the knowledge and support networks which can make all the difference.

And of course, these aren't distinct groups but overlapping challenges. Many prospective students from disadvantaged backgrounds might also be struggling with poor health or disabilities as well as managing caring responsibilities and low-paid work.

These students often achieve incredible things against all odds: and it is vital that they have all the help and support they need to overcome their particular challenges and personal circumstances.

Yet we know that all too often, adult learners are either understood as adults looking to retrain or students who didn't get the grades to go to university first-time round.

Those groups are undoubtedly part of the story – but by no means all of it.

As OFFA suggests, adult learners often have a whole range of reasons for wanting to return to study which are often very different from those of eighteen year olds.

For example, we are seeing increasing interest from older students wanting to re-enter the workforce once their children have left home.

And it's only by recognising the diversity of that experience that we can start to respond to it.

Part of that response, of course, has got to be ensuring that adult learners have access to appropriate finance. Across all of the UK.

The debate about fees and funding will never go away and remains pertinent across all 4 Nations. Of course, we have now had the forward thinking Diamond Review in Wales the recent White Paper from the Welsh Government. And in England, following Labour's Election pledge and a possible review of tertiary education by the Government, there is

increasing focus on tuition fees and funding support. So now is the time for us to reaffirm that if politicians want to focus on fees in England, in a way that genuinely helps the economy, then they must focus their efforts on part-time students. This will really help widening access and make the biggest difference.

There is still much more we could do to help prospective students – especially those being targeted through widening participation programmes.

We know, for example, that many prospective students who've been out of education for a while feel overwhelmed by the idea of a whole degree programme, and by signing up for such a major financial commitment. These individuals need help to test the waters before they feel confident enough to take their studies further.

Others just need a short course or a particular module. And small loans to cover these costs would make a big difference to these learners in England, for example.

Or what about creating a national strategy for adult skills and funding mechanisms in England that would really deliver the genuine culture towards lifelong learning?

I met last week with the High Commissioner of Singapore and what they are doing is fascinating.

Singapore faced a situation with a decreasing population that couldn't be expanded with foreign labour, so driving up productivity and skilling and re-skilling their existing workforce was vital to drive growth.

Cue SkillsFuture. An initiative where skills shortages are being addressed strategically. Where opportunities are being expanded for adult learners. Where relatively small sums of money is invested in an account for the workforce to use for bite-sized chunks of education.

It is based on the premise that a high quality education system is not just about the first 20 years of life – it needs to be a seamless continuum of education and employers must provide support. It also requires a culture change which celebrates lifelong learning rather than seeing it as a sign of earlier failure.

Here at the OU we're very much in favour of personal learning accounts to help mature students manage the costs of lifelong learning. These would enable people to put together a funding package from a variety of sources – including scholarships and charities as well as contributions from government and employers – to meet specific training needs.

Second, adult learners need to feel as much part of our institutions as young people do.

Our research tells us that too many part-time students feel that their needs aren't being met within the current system. Despite the huge variation in their personal circumstances, too many still feel that there's only a 'one-size-fits-all' model of higher education on offer.

Too many express a sense that they are an imposition or an inconvenience. Too many feel isolated and invisible.

Distance learners hate getting generic messages about 'coming on to campus'.

Mature students feel frustrated that their experience beyond the classroom isn't recognised by rigid entry requirements.

Older learners also feel demoralised by having to study topics they are already very familiar with – simply to satisfy existing course requirements.

So there is a real challenge for us as a sector to make sure that we are really listening to what mature students are telling us they need.

Because their idea of flexible learning can be very different from established concepts of flexible learning. And we need to make sure that our teaching methods and pedagogical practice as well as our systems and structures are as responsive and inclusive as possible.

At the Open University, for example, we seek to recognise and reward prior learning and experience – and we would like to see credit transfer become much more acceptable across the sector. In Scotland, we are pleased to see the expansion of articulation with full credit transfer and examining student progression from College to University is a key part of widening access and promoting pathways.

Indeed, while we need to recognise the particular needs of part-time and mature students, it's vital that we don't just develop a 'deficit' model which conceptualises them as 'lacking' in one way or another.

On the contrary, we should positively celebrate the ways in which older students can enrich our learning environments and educational culture. The life skills and prior experience of mature students, for example, not only benefits them, but also provides younger students with inspiring examples, positive role models and new perspectives.

So these adult learners should not be an afterthought. Their significance, their contribution and their needs should be actively sought, respected, and embedded across the institution.

If we are serious about reaching out to adult learners, then we have to be proactive about it.

I think we need to reconceptualise and reframe what we think of as 'outreach'.

It has to be a systematic and sustainable programme, aimed at genuine engagement and underpinned by a commitment to retention.

It has to include accessible and relevant information, advice and guidance, promoting the benefits of lifelong learning and helping individuals navigate the variety of options and find the right path which suits their particular needs.

It has to be based within communities and grounded in partnerships with other organisations, to build robust 'bridges' into higher education for a wide range of people.

As our contribution to this project shows, one way that we approach this at the Open University is through access modules which help build confidence, develop study skills, and prepare students for larger commitments, increasing their chances of success.

These access modules, which cover introductory modules across the humanities, social sciences and STEM subjects have proved very popular with our students. In fact, over the past decade, one in six Open University students have studied an access-type module.

Above all, we need to reinforce our commitment to widening participation by devoting appropriate time and resources to this work. We need to invest in it just as we invest in other vital aspects of our institutions.

And as OFFA's report indicates, we are going to have to be flexible, creative, and inclusive in all our practices – from admission to graduation – to be successful in re-engaging adult learners. Again, this is about acknowledging and respecting the diversity of adult learners, and recognising that what works for one student won't necessarily work for everyone.

I just want to conclude with some figures from England which demonstrate – in the starkest terms – just how clearly widening participation depends on boosting part-time provision.

Over a three year period, between 2011 and 2014, new entrants to English universities from low participation neighbourhoods fell by more than seven thousand.

And ninety-nine per cent of that decline was because of the collapse in part-time numbers.

So those of us committed to widening participation have got to be making the case – right across the four nations – that part-time provision matters.

Because you simply cannot widen participation without a robust sector in part-time provision.

But I think we can be more ambitious still. With the huge and increasing demand for a skilled workforce, there is an unprecedented opportunity to genuinely create a culture – across the UK - in which lifelong learning becomes the norm, as is happening in Singapore.

With national strategies for adult learning, we can ensure that everyone – regardless of age, gender, existing skill set, location, and background – has access to the education and training that they need, right across their lifetime.

I believe that is hugely exciting – and that there is a growing recognition that this is not only possible, but essential. And we have a responsibility to make this a reality – to do our very best for students today and tomorrow.

Thank you very much.