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How to cite:

Butcher, John (2022). Lifelong Learning: can policy impact on the hardest-to-reach learners? Forum for Access and Continuing Education.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<https://www.face.ac.uk/blog-post/lifelong-learning-can-policy-impact-on-the-hardest-to-reach-learners/>

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FACE Blog

Lifelong Learning: can policy impact on the hardest-to-reach learners?

'The characteristic feature of Lifelong Learning is flexibility' (Lifelong Education Commission, 2021, p.50)

I was attending a regular institutional policy meeting recently. In discussing all things pertaining to OfS (we were very exercised by the potential impact of B3 changes around student outcomes metrics) a colleague mentioned the LLE (Lifelong Loan Entitlement, also known as the Lifelong Learning Entitlement). This was heralded a couple of years ago as a big thing, a game changer in policy which could mitigate some of the serious challenges facing both adult education (since 2004/5 mature learner numbers declined from 4 million to 2 million in FE) and part-time HE (since 2005 numbers dropped from 840K to 500K).

The then Universities Minister (remember when we had one) Michelle Donelan stated in a speech to TASO in April 2021:

“We need to develop a society where training, re-training and learning throughout your life is second nature. We all need to stop thinking about education as something you tick off and move on from and start thinking about it as something we can draw from throughout our lives... we need a real alternative to the traditional three-year degree, that remains out of grasp of too many. Because it is hard – if not impossible – to take three years out of full-time employment when you have a mortgage, children or caring responsibilities”.

Well, 'D'oh' as some researchers and practitioners in part-time, flexible and adult learning might say. The espoused intention of LLE appears admirable, to give people the opportunity to train, retrain and upskill throughout their lives. It could, in theory, lead to a massive, transformation of post-18 study, stimulating modular education and offer greater parity between further and higher education, as well as enabling learners to space out their studies, transfer credits between institutions, and take up more part-time study. Shorter, standalone qualifications including Higher National Certificates (HNCs) or Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) could become more accessible and learners could collect a basket of qualifications (including at an equivalent level) relevant to their needs rather than being forced to work on linear progression to degree level study.

Following consultation in 2021, short course trial pilots were due to be implemented in England in 2022. I reflect, in all the political and societal turmoil since the announcement of LLE, things have gone very quiet. The Lifelong Learning Commission chaired by former universities minister Chris Skidmore, issued a report in response (2021) suggesting a need for whole system reform: prioritising the part-time student premium; cutting the ELQ rules; introducing means-tested maintenance grants; unbundling qualifications in a credit-based system by switching to a per-module funded allocation amounting to six years of full-time study (720 credits rather than 480) and integrating a new Careers Service. However, we wait to see if (and when) LLE finally emerges, it is the silver bullet revolutionising lifelong learning, helping the 'hardest-to-reach' adult learners access HE?

Critics have already identified the danger of adding more educational dead ends to a system that is already full of them, with a risk that funding at a modular (rather than at a qualification) level could create a significant administrative burden. Concerns have also been expressed about the need to provide robust information, advice and guidance to help learners build individual modules into meaningful qualifications particularly on professionally accredited programmes.

However, too often missing from these policy debates is the student voice, the experiences of those part-time adult learners who have managed to overcome considerable obstacles and re-engage with education. Such learners desperately require more flexible systems and approaches. My research (Butcher, 2020) over the past seven years has identified four key barriers (building on Gorrard *et al*, 2006) which LLE needs to address:

1. **Cost and time** as examples of **situational barriers**. Since the tripling of HE tuition fees in England in 2012, part-time learners, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds have consistently expressed concerns that, given their personal and financial circumstances (juggling a series of insecure jobs leaving little 'spare time') that HE appears a risky outlay given the lack of guaranteed return:

Paying rent or a mortgage impacts on people's ability and their decision to invest in part-time education ... in my late 30s, is it something that is going to have been worth the time, and the financial investment ... it's people like us who have taken the impact of the fees.

2. **Support and culture** as an example of an **institutional barrier**

Institutional flexibility is key to meeting the needs of adult learners who can only study part-time but this 'flexibility' runs counter to prevailing HE paradigms that students are all 18 year-old school leavers studying full-time:

I'm 38, I started a degree at 18 but that was horrendous – my mathematics wasn't up to scratch – they shouldn't have accepted me ... I suffered quite a bit mentally because of that ... now I'm in one day per week but I have to do many hours of independent study – I feel like I'm playing catch-up, fearing I'm going to underachieve.

I'm 50 years of age now, a recovering addict – ten years sober. I work full-time and study in the library on my days off. I'm pretty kind of raw and new to learning ... it's hard but my confidence and my outlook has changed in life as well

3. **Lack of confidence** as an example of a **dispositional barrier**

Universities need to do much more to acknowledge the deeply-embedded psychological barriers some adult learners carry with them, especially after a poor or disrupted experience of compulsory education:

I was taken out of school when I was 15 and missed my GCSEs. Since then I have needed to work full-time and tried to study part-time, but stressful things happen when you get older. I got so far behind I became demoralised.

Given the meandering, stop-start journey many adult learners take to HE, it would also be valuable if HE teaching recognised what skills and experiences adults bring with them:

I hit my teens and my academic life collapsed really, so my confidence dipped massively, and my brain had been stagnating. I signed up and it reinvigorated the love of learning that I hadn't had for about ten years. It built on things I may have missed at school ... I really want to get back on track with my life really.

4. **Lack of recognition for transformative personal benefit** as a **societal barrier**

Part-time learners reflected powerfully on the immense positive impact of engaging in part-time HE, despite the difficulties. This student identifies personal satisfaction as well as impact on family via role modelling:

One of the things I missed when not studying part-time was the element of feeling like I was actually doing something to move forward...It keeps my mind active, my kids look and say 'well if he can do it, we can do it'...I sit with my kids to do my homework and help them with theirs ... I hope it rubs off on them, just showing that you're never too old to learn.

LLE pinpoints the problem in lifelong learning, in which a broken and inflexible sector is unfit for the purpose of engaging adult learners in HE and addressing national skills shortages. I am unsure that an entitlement to four years of life-wide modular study is bold enough to stimulate a moribund system, but the flexibility of short course provision may be a start. I want to be optimistic but given current political chaos I have to remain sanguine, fearing LLE will quietly be kicked into the long grass or rendered 'toothless' by a lack of political will to invest in lifelong learning. And as a consequence, yet again, our most vulnerable learners will be marginalised, with many viewing HE as not for the likes of them...

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