

Written evidence submitted by the Open University

Session to be conducted via written correspondence

List of Questions

The Committee would like to thank you for contributing to this inquiry, your evidence will be used to help shape the Committee's report into Adult Skills and Lifelong Provision. The Committee particularly welcomes your suggestions and recommendations on ways adult skills and lifelong provision can be improved.

1. What are the characteristics of the part-time higher education learner cohort?

There is no typical part-time student – people of all ages and backgrounds study part-time for many different reasons, including: to take advantage of a second-chance of higher education, to update their skills, to get a qualification, to boost their career, to change career direction or to combine study with childcare or work, among other reasons.

Looking at part-time students at The Open University:¹

- **The majority are in work.** Over three quarters (76%) are in full-time or part-time employment, often low paid.
- **Many have dependent children.** More than one in three (36%) part-time undergraduate students in England have dependent children.²
- **Many are from disadvantaged backgrounds.** More than one in five (22%) undergraduate Open University entrants in England are from low participation areas.³
- **The OU is crucial to social mobility.** One in ten of all undergraduate entrants in the whole of England from low participation areas study at the OU.⁴
- **OU students tend to be older than full-time students.** The average age of new OU undergraduates is 28. However, there is a large and growing number of younger students: a third are aged 24 and under and the average age of OU students is falling. The OU is also the 11th biggest provider of HE in England for students aged 20 and under from low participation areas.⁵
- **Many OU students are taking up a second chance of education having not fulfilled their potential first time around.** Almost two thirds of OU students began their studies without holding the traditional entry qualifications demanded by most universities of three or more A-levels.⁶

¹ Data in this paragraph comes from Open University, [Facts and Figures 2017/18](#) unless otherwise stated

² Department for Education, [Student Income and Expenditure Survey 2014/15: English Report](#), March 2018

³ HESA Student Record 2018/19

⁴ HESA Student Record 2018/19

⁵ HESA Student Record 2018/19

⁶ Internal OU research

- **Many OU students have a disability.** Over 26,000 students at the OU declare a disability or long-standing illness or health condition, equivalent to over one in five (21%) students, more than the total number of students at most universities.⁷
- **Many OU students are on higher and degree apprenticeship programmes.** The OU has over 2,000 students on our apprenticeship programme at over 550 employers, making us one of the largest degree apprenticeship providers in England.⁸
- **There are OU students in every local area of the United Kingdom.** The OU is the largest university in the UK and there are a considerable number of OU students in every single Parliamentary constituency in England.⁹
- **More students study at the OU both in higher education coldspots and in low participation areas.** Unlike full-time providers, the OU has both a higher entry rate and a substantially higher market share in constituencies which are higher education coldspots with limited local face-to-face provision as well as in constituencies where a higher proportion of people live in low participation areas.¹⁰
- **OU students have a range of different motivations for study.** The underlying motivation is mostly to improve job prospects or to change career. Increasingly, however, the quality, flexibility and low cost of OU study have been attracting a wider range of students, in particular younger students who may have in the past attended a campus university. Other important motivations for many of our students include being the first in their family to go to university ('breaking the mould') and taking a second chance to achieve their potential having faced challenges or made the wrong choices earlier in their lives ('righting a wrong').

Part-time students are also diverse in terms of how they want to study. Our students strongly value flexible learning which allows them to choose when, where and how they study and the pace at which they learn. For example, there is an increasing number of students studying "accelerated part-time degrees" involving some periods of full-time intensity study and some periods of part-time study, varying their study intensity in line with the changing demands of their work and family lives. However, the funding system does not always support students who want to study flexibly.

⁷ Internal OU data

⁸ OU internal data

⁹ OU analysis of HESA Student Record 2018/19. The Open University is one of the 5 biggest universities in 90% of English constituencies, is one of the 8 biggest universities in every single constituency outside of London and in all but 17 of the 73 constituencies in London, and is one of the 14 biggest universities in every single constituency in England

¹⁰ Ibid

2. What are the consequences of the fall in participation in part-time higher education?

Since 2009/10, the number of people in England accessing part-time undergraduate higher education has fallen dramatically, with a 67% decline in the number of new undergraduate entrants every year.¹¹

This has led to:

- A 51% fall in the number of adults aged 21 and over accessing undergraduate higher education.
- A 26% fall in the total number of people in England of all ages accessing undergraduate higher education.
- 1.2 million “lost learners” – this is how many more people in England would have accessed undergraduate higher education between 2009/10 and 2018/19 if numbers had remained constant at 2009/10 levels.
- A 16% fall since 2011/12 in the total number of people from low participation areas entering higher education, reducing social mobility.¹²
- England now having 40% fewer adults over the age of 21 entering undergraduate higher education each year relative to its working age population than the rest of the UK.

The main driver of the decline was the 2012 student funding reforms in England. When tuition fees were increased to replace the removal of almost all teaching grant, mature students – to the surprise of policymakers - proved substantially more price and debt sensitive than young students even though fee loans were extended to part-time students.¹³ The reforms also involved abolishing the means-tested part-time fee grant that had previously exempted every part-time student on a low income from paying any tuition fees at all (57,000 part-time students received the grant).¹⁴ This has been acknowledged by the higher education minister of the time, Lord Willetts, who has said that “*I plead guilty on part-time students*” and observed that “*The lesson I learned from this is a very important one for education policy, incidentally, which is there is not a single model that works for all students. The evidence is that repayable loans work for some, like 18-year-olds going to university for three years, and do not work for others, like part-time students. You need a different model for part-time students*”.¹⁵

A secondary driver was the decision in 2008 to end public funding, including student loans, for students who already had an equivalent or higher qualification to the one they now wanted to study, even if they were wanting to change career or to reskill in a shortage area.¹⁶

¹¹ All data in this section comes from OU analysis of HESA, Student Record 2009/10 to 2018/19, various years, unless otherwise stated

¹² WonkHE, [Is there really a record number of disadvantaged students in HE](#), Mark Leach, 20 November 2017

¹³ See, for example, Department for Education, [Impact of the student finance system on participation, experience and outcomes of disadvantaged young people: Literature Review](#), May 2019

¹⁴ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, [Interim Impact Assessment: Urgent Reforms to Higher Education Funding and Student Finance](#), November 2010

¹⁵ House of Commons Treasury Committee, [Oral Evidence: Student Loans](#), 13 December 2017

Such a huge decline in lifelong learning has meant a reduction in the number of people taking a “second chance” to fulfil their potential. It has also meant that far fewer adults are learning the new skills and getting the qualifications they need to progress in their careers or to change to a new career.

This has had a substantial economic impact. Around 40 per cent of the UK’s workforce has skills materially misaligned with their jobs and the decline in part-time higher education makes it a lot more difficult to resolve this issue. The UK Government’s Industrial Strategy Council has identified significant shortages of higher technical and professional skills as well as interpersonal skills such as critical thinking, creativity, negotiation, communication, teaching and training.¹⁷ And, looking ahead, one in eight workers with low or intermediate level qualifications is at high risk of their jobs being automated within 20 years and virtually everyone at this skill level is considered to be at medium or high risk.¹⁸ As acknowledged in the UK Government’s Industrial Strategy, the increasing speed of technological change is making lifelong learning not just a choice but an economic necessity, both to retrain in the face of structural change and to upskill so the UK economy can take full advantage of new technologies with a workforce that is equipped to utilise them effectively.¹⁹

The decline in lifelong learning has also had an adverse effect on those who have missed out on the opportunity to study at higher level. Research from London Economics estimated substantial lifetime earnings benefits from a part-time degree: looking at those who began their studies without A-levels and complete a degree at age 37, male graduates are estimated to earn a total of £377,000 more over the rest of their careers and female graduates £196,000 more.²⁰ This has substantial benefits to both the individual and the Exchequer.

Finally, the decline in lifelong learning has had a detrimental social impact as the number of people accessing higher education – including many students from disadvantaged backgrounds – has fallen by a fifth overall. Research demonstrates that higher education has a number of positive social impacts beyond the earning gain to individuals.²¹

¹⁶ See House of Commons, Innovation, Universities and Skills Committee, [Withdrawal of funding for equivalent or lower level qualifications \(ELQs\)](#), 2008 for a good overview of the ELQ policy

¹⁷ Industrial Strategy Council, [2020 Annual Report](#), February 2020

¹⁸ Office for National Statistics, [The probability of automation in England: 2011 and 2017](#), 2019

¹⁹ See e.g. HM Government, [Industrial Strategy: Building a Britain Fit for the Future](#), 2018

²⁰ London Economics, [Estimating the return to part-time undergraduate degrees](#), 2018. This is the estimated undiscounted real gross earnings premium of a representative part-time student who graduates at age 37

²¹ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, [BIS Research Paper Number 146: The Benefits of Higher Education Participation for Individuals and Society](#), 2013

3. If the Government were to lift loan restrictions for some Equivalent or Lower Qualifications, which subjects and levels should they prioritise?

There are already some limited exemptions to Equivalent or Lower Qualifications restrictions on public funding for higher education. These include:

- Initial Teacher Training course undertaken on a part-time basis.
- An Honours Degree in an engineering, technology or computer science subject undertaken on a part-time basis. This exemption was introduced in 2015.
- An Honours Degree in subjects allied to medicine, biological sciences, veterinary sciences, agriculture and related subjects, physical sciences and mathematical sciences undertaken on a part-time basis. This exemption was introduced in 2017.
- An Honours Degree in nursing, midwifery and the allied health professions for all modes of study. This exemption was introduced in 2017.

While there are thousands of learners who are taking advantage of these relaxations in ELQ rules to return to HE and update their skills and qualifications, the changes in the rules have had far less impact than expected.²²

Reasons for this lower-than-expected take-up include:

- Tuition fees combined with the well-documented reluctance of mature learners to take out student loans mean substantial barriers still exist for potential students who are eligible for support, who are far more price sensitive and debt averse than young full-time students.²³
- Most graduates who are potentially interested in additional study want to study short courses – either a sub-degree qualification or a module – rather than commit to studying a full degree. This means that they would not qualify for support under the current rules.
- The partial exemptions to the rules means that many graduates who are interested in further study are not eligible for funding due to the subject they wish to study not being covered.
- The lack of maintenance support for part-time students. While the UK Government announced in 2015 that maintenance support would be extended to part-time students, it has only been extended to the small minority of part-time students who are studying face-to-face on degree courses and further extensions have been ruled out. This means that 91% of part-time students are ineligible for support.²⁴

²² See Department for Education, [Student Loan Forecasts: England – 2018/19](#), 2019. According to the HESA Student Record 2018/19, there were 8,200 part-time students in England taking advantage of the ELQ exemptions in the 2018/19 academic year

²³ See, for example, Department for Education, [Impact of the student finance system on participation, experience and outcomes of disadvantaged young people: Literature Review](#), May 2019

²⁴ Department for Education, [Student Loan Forecasts: England – 2018/19](#), 2019

The report of the Independent Panel supporting the UK Government's Review of Post-18 Education and Funding ("The Augar Report") recommended that ELQ rules should be abolished, with all students being given a new entitlement to a lifelong learning loan allowance equivalent to four years full-time undergraduate degree funding which can be used for any approved qualification or, crucially, module of HE study without restriction.²⁵

Provided that existing graduates are eligible for a lifelong learning loan allowance, adjusted to take account of their previous higher education experience, these recommendations could be a significant step forward in supporting flexibility. Combined with the existing ELQ relaxations for STEM subjects, nursing, allied health professions and teaching, the recommendations would encourage more mature graduates to return to HE and upskill or reskill by providing funding for short courses. The recommendations would also encourage younger students to consider whether completing a full degree when they are young is the most effective way of using their lifetime allowance, boosting both lifelong learning and higher technical and sub-degree qualifications.

The Augar recommendations would also open up new models of study, for example allowing students to follow the first two years of a degree course to achieve a Diploma of Higher Education and then to top this up with modules from other disciplines or that have more of a focus on a student's likely career instead of continuing to deepen their specialist subject specific knowledge to complete a full degree either as an alternative to the final year of a degree course or later in their lives.

4. What actions should the Government take to remove the financial barriers faced by disadvantaged part-time students?

There are two main areas where action to remove the financial barriers faced by disadvantaged part-time students would be most effective: reducing tuition fees and increasing maintenance support.

Significantly lower tuition fees. The main cause of the decline in part-time study was the 2012 student funding reforms. As highlighted earlier, prior to these reforms, disadvantaged part-time students received a means-tested fee grant which covered all of their tuition fees and those who were not eligible for this support were able to afford the substantially lower tuition fees out-of-pocket, often with support of their employer, due to the previous funding model. Significantly lower tuition fees could make a big difference in encouraging more disadvantaged students to study as part-time students are substantially more price sensitive and debt averse than young full-time students. This could be introduced in a targeted way, for priority subjects to tackle skill shortages, priority geographical areas and/or priority access groups such as students with disabilities.

²⁵ Department for Education, [Independent Panel Report to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding](#), 2019

Introducing maintenance support for part-time students. The other area that needs to be addressed is the lack of maintenance support for the vast majority of part-time students in England. There are significant inequities in the current system of maintenance support which deter mature learners from studying and pushes others towards less flexible modes of study and longer, more expensive, qualifications which may be ill-suited to their needs. There are three key issues:

- As noted above, more than nine out of ten part-time students are not eligible for maintenance support: only face-to-face part-time students studying at degree-level are eligible. This means that students who choose – or often need – to study by distance learning or who want to study at Level 4 or Level 5 are not entitled to support.
- Part-time students who are parents are not eligible for additional support through the Childcare Grant or the Parents' Learning Allowance, both of which are only open to full-time students.
- While students who have a severe disability that prevents them studying at a face-to-face university are eligible for maintenance loans, the system is extremely demanding in terms of the degree of proof required from such student to demonstrate conclusively that a face-to-face university would not be able to meet their needs via a written statement from a face-to-face university that this is the case.²⁶ As a result, very few disabled students take up this entitlement. A more permissive system that allows students who have a disability that makes them potentially eligible for a maintenance loan for distance learning to choose this mode of study if that is what they think best meets their needs would be a sensible reform to enhance student choice.

The experience of Wales following implementation of the recommendations from the Diamond Review illustrates the impact such reforms could have. The introduction of the maintenance elements of the new Welsh system in 2018/19 combined with the existing low fee funding model has led to the number of part-time students receiving tuition fee support in Wales more than doubling even though only first- and second-year students are currently eligible.²⁷ The reforms have had a particularly strong impact on disadvantaged learners.²⁸

The recent ONS accounting changes mean that there is more scope to reconsider the most effective mechanism for funding lifelong learning. Part of the rationale for the 2012 reforms was the impact on the headline measure of the deficit of shifting funding away from direct upfront support via grants to indirect support via writing-off student loans 30 years in the future. This rationale no longer holds as the anticipated long-term expenditure has to be recognised upfront in the public accounts. This opens up an opportunity to shift towards a more effective system involving more

²⁶ See page 12 of Student Loans Company, [Support for Part-Time Students](#), 2019

²⁷ See Table 7C of Student Loan Company, [Student Support for Higher Education in Wales](#), 2019. The number of students in receipt of part-time tuition fee loans issued by 31 October in the academic year has increased from 2,600 in the 2017/18 to 5,800 in the 2019/20

²⁸ Welsh Government, [Jump in part-time students accessing support following introduction of most generous support package in the UK](#), 31 January 2019

upfront support for part-time study while having only limited impact on the public finances.

If the cost of such reforms is considered too high given current fiscal constraints, the UK Government could, in the first instance, develop a targeted package of reforms to remove the financial barriers facing the most disadvantaged mature learners – with targeted fee cuts and maintenance bursaries in certain geographical areas, disadvantaged students and/or for high priority subjects.

There are two other areas where there is a risk of new financial barriers to lifelong learning being imposed over the next few years:

- **The part-time student premium.** This is funding via the OfS teaching grant aimed at supporting activities which help at-risk students successfully complete their course. This funding has been cut by 16 per cent per student in cash terms over the last two years, from £1,070/FTE to £896/FTE. There is a risk of further cuts, which would force providers to increase tuition fees and reduce support for disadvantaged students.
- **Accelerated part-time study.** The OU currently has a number of students engaged in accelerated part-time study, where students choose to study at full-time intensity for a part of their course when their circumstances allow. Accelerated part-time students are subject to the part-time fee cap of £6,750 rather than the full-time fee cap of £9,000 despite them studying at full-time intensity. The OU can currently offer this form of study as our full-time equivalent fee is below the part-time fee cap. However, unless there are changes to the regulations governing accelerated part-time study, it is likely to become financially unsustainable within the next few years despite costing a lot less to students and the taxpayer than full-time study elsewhere.

5. Are universities directing enough spending on outreach work, particularly towards adults who might not yet be ready for higher level study?

The Open University invests significant amounts of resource in outreach work, including activities to help prepare adults for higher-level study.

This takes a wide variety of forms, including:

- Marketing activity to engage people who may not otherwise think higher education is for them.
- Co-production of television and radio programmes, often broadcast at peak viewing hours, through our partnership with the BBC.
- Our free learning sites, OpenLearn and FutureLearn, which attract millions of visitors every year.
- “Try before you buy” courses to give those interested in studying at a higher level a taster of what the experience would be like.
- Free access modules to prepare students without traditional entry qualifications for the demands of higher-level study.

The Open University's Access and Participation Plan includes total investment of £25 million over the next five years, although this is only part of our total spend on outreach activities.²⁹ This is funding specific activities including:

- Fee waivers for low-income students without prior qualifications who undertake access modules at the OU.
- Personal pathway advisors.
- Peer-to-peer mentoring scheme.
- Bursaries for carers and care experienced students.

Looking at the sector as a whole, investment in outreach activities targeted at mature learners has decreased significantly in recent years. HEFCE used to allocate funding to providers aimed at widening access for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. This funding was worth £68 million in 2015/16, roughly half of which was based on mature student numbers, with every part-time student attracting £1,044 of funding per FTE if they lived in the lowest participation quartile and £522 if they lived in the second lowest participation quartile.³⁰ HEFCE decided to discontinue this funding stream in 2017/18 in order to fund the National Collaborative Outreach Programme, now called [Uni Connect](#), which is a centrally-managed programme targeted entirely at school-age children who live in certain low participation areas. One option to support outreach activity for mature learners would be for the OfS to establish a new strand of the Uni Connect programme targeted at mature learners.

6. Is existing centralised information, advice and guidance effective at signposting adult learners, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, towards higher education options?

Adult learners at higher education level are too often an afterthought in considerations of information, advice and guidance.

Mature students have access to far less information, advice and guidance to help them decide on whether and what to study and hence to make fully informed choices. For example, OU research earlier this year found that only just over half (52%) of people in England who are interested in studying at HE level are aware of the existence of tuition fee loans for part-time study.

One of the objectives of the UK Government's Careers Strategy is for "*everyone to get support tailored to their circumstances (and) all adults should be able to access free face-to-face advice, with more bespoke support for those who most need it*".³¹ However, the programmes to successfully deliver on this ambition are not yet there and the UK Government needs to go further to address retraining and upskilling at all skill levels.

²⁹ Open University, [Access and Participation Plan 2020/21 to 2024/25](#), 2020

³⁰ HEFCE, [Student Opportunity: Method Used to Inform the Indicative Allocation for 2015/16](#), 2015

³¹ Department for Education, [Careers Strategy: Making the most of everyone's talents](#), 2017

One option would be to extend the National Careers Service to include better course search functions, more access to face-to-face advice and direct links to bitesize free online taster courses to help build confidence and inform decisions. The recent development of [The Skills Toolkit](#) is a good start in this regard. It is also crucial that the National Retraining Scheme and the new £3 billion National Skills Fund covers all skills levels and is linked into the National Careers Service.

There is also much which could be done to improve the supporting advice and guidance provided to part-time students by the Student Loans Company to support their applications for financial support. This should include redesigning the application process around the needs and requirements of part-time students with the aim of allowing all students to easily make successful applications without the need to understand the complex rules about how the part-time student loan system works.

7. The former skills Minister, Anne Milton, talked about fears of a “middle-class grab” on higher and degree apprenticeships. What can a) universities and b) Government do to ensure disadvantaged adult learners are accessing degree apprenticeships?

The OU is one of the largest degree apprenticeship providers in England, supporting over 2,000 apprentices and partnering with over 550 employers, 40% of whom are SMEs.

Data on social mobility and apprenticeships

It is difficult to form a judgement on the social mobility impact of the degree apprenticeship programme as it is still an early stage in the programme and relatively small scale, with 22,500 starts on apprenticeships at Level 6 and Level 7 in 2018/19 compared to, for example, 824,000 undergraduate and taught postgraduate starts at English universities.

Early data presents a mixed picture. Recent analysis by the Office for Students compared Level 6 and Level 7 apprentices to university students studying similar subjects and found that apprentices tend to be older, substantially more likely to come from low participation areas and have a similar gender mix to the comparator used, though less likely to be disabled, come from an ethnic minority or live in a deprived areas based on the UK Government’s Index of Multiple Deprivation.³² The analysis also showed that there are significantly more Level 6 and Level 7 apprentices relative to the number of jobs in the North East, North West and the West Midlands than in southern regions of England. Data on the social class background of apprentices is not reported.

We would expect there to be progress in more disadvantaged learners accessing apprenticeships as employers expand their programmes. To date, many large

³² Office for Students, [Analysis of Level 6 and Level 7 Apprenticeships](#), 2020

employers have introduced their apprenticeship programmes amongst a mix of existing and new staff responding to the immediate skills needs within their organisations. Now many of them have full-formed skills strategies signed off by their Boards – with clear progression pathways, a good understanding of skills shortages and strategies to widen access – we are starting to see apprenticeship programmes being expanded to support different types and cohorts of learners. We hope that the data in future years will reflect this change in behaviour.

Increasing the social mobility impact of apprenticeships

Increasing the number of disadvantaged learners accessing higher apprenticeships requires a combined effort between employers, providers and government. This will need to sit alongside long-term stability in government policy and funding to allow employers the security to plan for the future.

Providers and employers

From the OU's experience, we believe that there are a number of fundamental structural aspects to degree apprenticeship programmes which can enable widening access to higher and degree apprenticeships. These include:

- **Removing the barrier of prior qualifications.** 13% of the OU's apprentices begin their studies without A-level or equivalent qualifications when they start their apprenticeship and 30% do not have Level 2 functional Maths or English or proof of prior qualifications at this level. This enables more people who have previously not had the opportunity to study and to earn while learning at a higher level to do so.
- **Having a flexible offer.** The OU's teaching model is a blended one, with world-renowned online course design and teaching combined with specialist face-to-face tutor support in small groups. The OU's offer is also adaptable to any organisation irrespective of location, providing all apprentices with a consistent high-quality learning experience across the country and our flexible delivery model enables apprentices to stay within their local area and helps employers build and retain their workforces. Our partnerships with Cornwall Council and other rural authorities expanding access to social work degree apprentices and with the Isle of Wight NHS Trust in helping fill the 120 nursing vacancies on the island by developing their existing staff are good examples of the value of this delivery model. The OU's flexibility is also effective for apprentices with disabilities by allowing students to access different forms of learning, additional support to contextualise the learning within a work-based environment and more flexibility as to when and where they study.
- **Partnerships and progression.** In order to widen access to disadvantaged adults, partnerships are critical. For example, we partner with further education colleges and licence and validate courses. This means that apprentices study at their local colleges, supported by local employers. We also support the development of Functional Skills. In addition, we believe that the Occupational Standards need to create true ladders of opportunity where disadvantaged adults can see their routes to progress between the different

levels of apprenticeships. Many employers tell us that the progression pathways that they are able to demonstrate really aid the promotion of the programmes.

Government policy

Government also has a role to play in ensuring that disadvantaged adults can access higher and degree apprenticeships. We welcome recent National Apprenticeship Week activity focusing on case studies of older learners and those with disabilities and such activity can play a significant role in helping these groups access apprenticeships in the future.

The OU believes that maintaining the current employer-led apprenticeship system will help as this will allow employers to identify key members of existing staff who would benefit from an apprenticeship and also share their talent pipelines and progression opportunities within the organisation so that there are clear pathways from moving from say a L3 to L5/6 apprenticeship.

Government targets to support disadvantaged apprenticeships will need to cover all types of disadvantaged groups, including adult learners and disabled learners. We cover our ideas on apprentices with disabilities this in more detail in our recent *Access to Apprenticeships* report.³³ This also supports the recent recommendation from the National Audit Office for the Government to strengthen its ambitions around widening participation in the apprenticeship programme.³⁴

Finally, any reforms to the Apprenticeship Levy must ensure that there are clear progression pathways for aspiring apprentices and must take into account measures to support long-standing existing staff who need to reskill and upskill. Many learners studying degree apprenticeships with the OU are older adults from disadvantaged backgrounds for whom the programme is having a transformative effect on their life chances through developing clear career progression routes for existing staff from entry level jobs. The case study below highlights one example. Policymakers need to exercise caution and ensure that any measures taken with the aim of improving social mobility do not have the unintended consequence of blocking social mobility for adults aged 21 and over from disadvantaged backgrounds.

³³ Open University, [Access to Apprenticeships](#), 2020

³⁴ National Audit Office, [The Apprenticeships Programme](#), 2019

Case Study: Degree Apprenticeship supporting career progression for NHS staff from disadvantaged backgrounds

Anthony has worked as a healthcare assistant for 11 years at Northamptonshire Healthcare Foundation Trust. His previous qualifications were at Level 2 yet colleagues at the Trust noticed Anthony's potential and talent and encouraged him to apply for the Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship – giving him the opportunity to gain a degree and develop his career.

"I didn't do too well at school," explained Anthony, "but my mentors saw my potential and we started to investigate what I need to do to study with The Open University.

"We identified that I would need my functional skills in maths and English. I completed those qualifications and then I applied to The Open University. I attended an open day, had an interview and the ball got rolling from there.

"The support from The Open University is outstanding. We have tutors that we can contact if we're struggling with theory, but we also have tutors that we can contact if we're struggling with the practical side of things and advise on our placements. My mentor really wants me to get through this process of developing myself further and they're very supportive as well.

8. How will the Covid-19 pandemic affect participation of adults in higher education in the next academic year, and in the longer term/

- **What steps could the Government take to reduce these impacts?**

Part-time higher education in England has been in crisis for much of the last decade. The Covid-19 situation has made action to resolve this crisis even more urgent.

The latest Bank of England Monetary Policy report³⁵ notes that 6 million employees working at 800,000 companies have been furloughed and forecasts unemployment will reach 9% in the second quarter of 2020. It also highlights that the Covid-19 crisis will have a long-term impact: the economy and labour market is not expected to fully recover by 2022 and the crisis is also expected to lead to structural change in the economy thanks to enduring changes in consumer habits, trading patterns and business models, including through accelerating existing trends. The report notes that there is a strong risk of scarring effects in the labour market with some individuals becoming detached from the labour market, seeing their skills atrophy or becoming less valuable while the economy adjusts.

³⁵ Bank of England, [Monetary Policy Report](#), May 2020

It is therefore crucial that the Government takes action to mitigate this, including to prevent the possible scarring effects from unemployment and/or being furloughed for lengthy periods of time. One way of supporting these workers is to ensure that furloughed workers and those who lose their job have access to skills training, including at higher levels, to prevent the scarring effects of job loss.

The UK Government has acknowledged this, with the Chancellor recently stating that: *“Every person who loses their job through this difficult period is a person the Government are determined to stand behind, whether that is with new skills, new training or indeed through supporting businesses to create new jobs. We are determined to make sure this happens”*.³⁶

The next phase of the UK Government’s response to the Covid-19 crisis needs to develop the initial work, including through [The Skills Toolkit](#) which is encouraging and supporting furloughed workers to learn new skills by signposting them towards short online courses, into a plan of action which can achieve the Chancellor’s ambition.

Potential risks to adult participation include:

- The impact of the Covid-19 crisis and the associated recession on demand for lifelong learning due to its expected effects on unemployment, real wages, economic uncertainty, expectations of the potential earnings returns on studying, and the ability of some, such as parents home-schooling their children, to make time to study. Historically, demand for part-time study has been pro-cyclical, increasing in times of economic growth and reducing in times of recession.³⁷ Government intervention is necessary to avoid this previous experience being repeated in the current recession.
- The impact of a prolonged Covid-19 lockdown and of the economic impact of the Covid-19 on employers on the sustainability of the apprenticeship programme.
- The impact on part-time students, such as those at the OU, who lose their jobs or see a drop in their earnings being unable to continue with their studies. As already noted, OU students in England are not eligible for maintenance support and over three quarters are in full-time or part-time employment. Research demonstrates that part-time students are more susceptible to cost issues than other students and more anxious about finance, more price sensitive and more debt averse.³⁸ This is partly because, unlike young full-time students, other parts of their lives take priority over their studies. For example, many are in work, have dependent children or other caring responsibilities (36% of part-time students have dependent children), are studying while managing a chronic disability or long-term health condition

³⁶ House of Commons Hansard, [Covid-19: Economic Debate \(Column 130\)](#), 12 May 2020

³⁷ See e.g. London Economics, [How is the demand for part-time higher education affected by changing economic conditions](#), 2017

³⁸ See, for example, Department for Education, [Impact of the student finance system on participation, experience and outcomes of disadvantaged young people: Literature Review](#), May 2019 (pages 115-117)

(20% of OU students declare a disability) or have significant financial responsibilities such as a mortgage. The lack of maintenance support is likely to be increasingly perceived as unfair as maintenance loans are extended to students at other institutions studying via distance learning due to the Covid-19 situation.

- The potential impact of the worsened fiscal outlook and the increase in the national debt in creating extra pressure to reduce expenditure on higher education, including through cuts in essential teaching grant funding and measures to reduce student loan outlay, such as new academic entry requirements, which will hit adult learners particularly hard.

Government needs to take a long-term view and ensure that the decisions they take do not put adult participation in higher education at risk given the importance that *increasing* participation will need to play in the recovery.

9. Is there anything else you think it is important for the Committee to consider that hasn't been covered by the questions above?

The review of the regulatory and funding arrangements surrounding flexible provision

In September 2019, the Secretary of State for Education identified “focus on part-time and flexible learning through a set of ambitious plans to deliver choice and flexibility throughout working lives and in response to the needs of business” as a key priority in his strategic guidance to the Office for Students.³⁹

Actions identified included:

- A review of the regulatory and funding arrangements surrounding flexible provision to promote greater student choice while maintaining the focus on quality. An interim report was due to be published in March 2020 though it is not clear how much progress has been made with this so far.
- A review of Access and Participation Plans to encourage providers to offer more part-time flexible and innovative provision to help mature learners access higher education.
- A Challenge Competition to show how greater diversity of provision can be encouraged and to understand more about the demand for different forms of flexible learning.
- Supporting accelerated degrees.
- Development of a plan for using the Office for Students' new powers around student transfers.

It is crucial that these actions continue to be prioritised and that the review of the regulatory and funding arrangements surrounding flexible provision covers the

³⁹ Department for Education, [Strategic Guidance to the Office for Students – Ministerial Priorities](#), 16 September 2019

financial barriers part-time students face (e.g. high tuition fees and the lack of maintenance support for flexible learning) as well as the regulatory barriers discussed above (e.g. issues around accelerated part-time provision and ELQ rules) and the issues around information, advice and guidance (e.g. outreach activity targeted at mature students and the challenges faced by part-time students in securing financial support from the Student Loans Company).

Higher technical education reform

There is a risk that the proposed reforms to the higher technical education system⁴⁰ will create an artificial distinction between “technical” and “academic” education and develop highly specialised qualifications with a short shelf-life which are rigidly focused on the specific competencies needed to do a particular occupation at the *current point in time* rather than the broader skills, expertise and theoretical understanding that people will need throughout their lives to adapt as jobs and occupations evolve due to new technologies and they progress throughout their careers or move to different sectors of the economy. As we highlighted above, the UK Government’s Industrial Strategy Council has emphasised the importance of a filling skills deficits across a broad range of vocational and interpersonal skills such as critical thinking, creativity, negotiation, communication, teaching and training in addition to specific higher technical skills, digital skills and STEM.

Separate “technical” and “academic” systems would also make it difficult for people on the “technical” track to continue to develop their skills outside of their occupational specialism. The current proposals risk creating separate education and training ladders which people are unable to move between rather than a unified tertiary education framework which would provide a common climbing frame making the necessary links between the different parts of the system.

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⁴⁰ Department for Education, [Higher Technical Education: Government Consultation](#), 2019