

Preparing for an Adult Higher Education Bill

Orientation

The UK Government issued a White Paper entitled *The Future of Higher Education* (Cm 5735) in January 2003. Following consultation and debate, many of the proposals it contained will be included in a short Higher Education Bill. It is now unlikely that this will be introduced to Parliament before the new year.

This briefing sets out three key questions that the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) hopes that MPs and Peers (as well as its own members and supporters) will use to help decide whether or not the proposed legislation is in the interests of adult learners.

Media coverage of higher education (HE) is dominated by the assumption that arrangements should be designed to meet the needs and wants of a larger or smaller cohort of young people extending their initial education (perhaps with a gap year) - and also the parents of this cohort. Second, the model assumes that a quality higher education experience depends upon such students having the opportunity to leave their parental home to study in their chosen subject wherever in the UK that they choose and can find a place. Third, the model assumes that finest quality higher education should be a full-time occupation for at least three years and that "working your way through college" is inherently less satisfactory (regardless of the number of timetabled hours in a "full-time" course).

NIACE asserts that such a model is a romantic and factually inaccurate sketch of British higher education as it is today (29% of full-time HE students and more than 90% of part-time HE students are aged 21+ - and part-timers represent more than 40% of all student in HE). A higher education system focussed exclusively on the needs of young full-time students is dysfunctional for modern Britain. It is the wrong model to meet the needs of a high-skills economy and a strong and inclusive civil society. It is:

- **Not affordable** in a society aspiring to provide both academic and vocational educational opportunities beyond compulsory schooling to all rather than to concentrating support on the few to the exclusion of the many;
- **Not necessary** in a global society within which e-learning has the potential to reduce the barriers imposed by time and place upon access to the finest scholarship and insight of academics and experts in every field;
- **Not desirable** in a society with an ageing demographic profile which will, increasingly, need to encourage and grow the talents of more its people more intensively and over a longer period.

We need better. We believe that a higher education system responsive to the needs of all learners, employers and society at large needs to be more diverse, more responsive and more flexible than that which we have today. On the basis of the White Paper, more and different proposals are required. In summary:

"If it doesn't work for adult learners, then it doesn't work."

Improving higher education for adult learners

NIACE does not dispute that higher education is under-funded. Nor does it reject, out of hand, the case that learners should contribute to the cost of their higher education – after all, that is already the case for almost all part-time students who pay fees. A Bill offering generous maintenance support to full-time students from poorer backgrounds; fee waivers for part-time students from poorer backgrounds and deferral arrangements for loan repayment by people on low incomes (including those who leave the labour market to undertake family care) deserves serious consideration.

A new fees regime must not, however, be designed simply for 18-21 year olds and their parents: Mature entrants to higher education will have fewer years from which to benefit from any wage premium that graduate status brings – and most will have been contributing to the cost of others' higher education through general taxation throughout their working lives.

We acknowledge that a case may be made that fees could be differentiated by discipline field if there are demonstrably different teaching costs – although we are not wholly convinced that this is sensible. What is of more concern however is the danger that institutionally-set differential fees will reinforce existing patterns of privilege and feed a form of educational apartheid driven more by status hierarchies resulting from research concerns and agendas than it is by the real quality and costs of teaching and learning experienced by students.

Three tests to apply

1. Will the Bill better meet the needs of part-time students?

Part-time learners are too often invisible when higher education is considered despite making up almost 42% (more than three quarters of a million people) of the UK higher education student cohort. These students:

- are to be found in almost all higher education institutions;
- already pay (unregulated) fees;
- have less access to loans and other support to help meet the costs of study.

The administrative dichotomy between 'full-time' and 'part-time' courses is increasingly unhelpful and outdated – not least because of the numbers of so-called 'full-time' students who hold down part-time employment. Legislation provides an opportunity for radical reforms to fund both institutions and learners according to study load.

NIACE is concerned that new arrangements may at worst penalize institutions with a track record of widening access and participation to adults who study while continuing to work and at best, offer few positive incentives for this.

Particular attention must be given to creating a funding regime that recognises and promotes the work of one of the UK institutions with a global reputation for quality and widening opportunity - the Open University.

2. Will the Bill make the higher education system easier to access for mature students?

Mature students are, effectively, second-class citizens in the Government's vision of higher education. The rationale and evidence base for the Government's priority of achieving, by 2010, a 50% participation level for people aged under 30 has never been satisfactorily explained (indeed, when questioned by the Select Committee on 12 December 2001, the then Minister for HE admitted she did not know the origin of the target).

This "Club 18-30" higher education policy has the effect of de-prioritizing concern to make access to learning lifelong. This is most marked for adults over the age of 54 who aspire to full-time study but who, despite years of paying taxes, are denied the opportunity to take out a student loan. In a society where, increasingly, people may need or choose to work beyond traditional retirement ages this seems perverse. And in an ageing society where older people can continue to contribute their skills and knowledge to their communities long after their retirement from the labour market, it is unjust. NIACE calls for a funding regime that does not discriminate against older students.

The Government is to be congratulated for proposing 'age-blind' support systems for part-time students. These should be extended to older learners who wish to study full-time. Furthermore, the proposed Office for Fair Access (OFFA) should have an explicit remit to combat age discrimination in university admissions – ensuring that access to institutions and courses is not rationed by age. There can be no fair access if would-be students are turned away simply on account of their age.

In 2001/2002 more than 125,000 full-time students were aged 21+ (29% of all full-time HE students and more than 250,000 part-time students were aged 21+ (more than 90% of all part-time HE students). Higher education is no longer simply the completion of a young person's initial education.

One question to ask of any higher education bill is whether student support and repayment systems and institutional admission arrangements are demonstrably and transparently equally accessible and fair across all ages and modes of study.

3. Will the Bill ensure that HE students in FE colleges are not disadvantaged because of inequities resulting from indirect funding mechanisms - and will it avoid further privileging higher education at the expense of further education?

The boundary between higher and further education is neither immovable nor always clear cut. In addition, more than 71,000 full-time and 136,000 part-time students in the UK (2001/02 HESA figures) are obtaining their higher education through study in further education colleges. This is approximately 11% of all students – a number greater than the total HE student population at the time of the Robbins report.

For many adult students, tied to local opportunities by family or work commitments, FE colleges represent the most accessible route to study – whether for further or higher education. These are most likely to include people with no family tradition of participation in higher education. NIACE believes that reforms should seek to reduce outmoded barriers between the sectors and to work towards a more unified tertiary

(post-school) education sector in which the student experience may be different but should be equivalent in terms of parity of esteem. FE colleges delivering higher education must have the same unit of resource as higher education institutions receive for such students.

At present, as the Secretary of State for Education and Skills has observed, Government invests an average of £4,300 per year for further education students and an average of £5,300 per year for university students. Both figures are too low – and in designing a new funding regime for HE, there needs to be careful consideration of why the differential exists and how great it should be.

NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (England and Wales), is a registered charity, founded in 1921 to represent the interests of adult learners, and of those who make provision for them, at all levels and wherever adults learn. Its membership is drawn from all sectors of post-compulsory education and training, and NIACE works within and across sectors. NIACE membership also includes bodies that operate wholly or partly in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

NIACE seeks to secure an education system responsive to the diversity of adults' needs and aspirations as learners, and in particular to those who benefited least from initial education. It is our belief that a system fit for adults of all ages and in all their complexity will work better for all learners.

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