

Putting students first, and why part time education matters

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KAREN FOLEY: Hi, and welcome back to the Student Hub Live, our online live interactive event. And today is the 30th of September, and we're recording all of our sessions. But if you miss any of it, you can also watch it on the catch-up that's going to be available on the website.

Well, I'm now joined by John Butcher from the CICP, the Centre... tell us, John. That's a very interesting area.

JOHN BUTCHER: I work at the Open University in the Centre for Inclusion and Collaborative Partnerships. And essentially, we're the part of the university that's responsible for our access provision. So this is all the preparation work for study. And also, the university's widening access and success strategy.

KAREN FOLEY: Wow, fantastic. Now, you've come to talk to us about Students First and Part-time Matters. And we've got loads of students out there who are very new, who are feeling part of the community. Actually, I'd like to go back to that Wordle now because we asked you how you were feeling. And yeah, we've had excited, nervous, happy, eager, fidgety, comfortable. Brilliant to see so many words coming through on that word cloud as well.

And we also asked you where you were. And this is the map showing you where everybody is located. So if you are choosing the Watch Only button and you'd like to get involved with this sort of thing, you can choose the 'live and interactive' button on the website, and then you get an OUCU, an Open University Computer Username. And then you can show us where you are, tell us how you're feeling, and engage with some of the widgets or interactive tools that we've got planned for the session. So as you can see, everyone spread out a great spread across the UK. Good to see people in Europe, too. And I know we've had some mail from further afield. So we'll just briefly go to the social media desk. Helen and HJ.

HJ: Yeah. Well, Chat's going well. And yes, we've got people from all over. So we would love to hear where you are. And...

[DING]

Oh. And some mail, of course. Well, we've been getting loads of mail, isn't it? It's fantastic all the mail coming in. Let's have a quick check, because we're eager to start this discussion as well. We always love talking about people's OU stories, and how they started, and part-time learning really matters to a lot of people, doesn't it?

I wouldn't have been able to do university if it wasn't for the OU. So we're very pleased about that. But let's have a little look, quick look at our selfies.

We've got Harry's study area. Another very neat and organised. I think that's a trend. I might be the only one that's a bit messy out of some people here. What else have we got? Jack's

study area as well. It's nice to have an outside window because you get a lovely view while you're studying as well, which is very nice.

HELEN: I would daydream, though. I would get distracted by whatever's going on outside. And here we've got veteran bandits study buddies. Two gorgeous dogs lying on the sofa there. They're allowed on the sofa, apparently.

And because we were just talking about where people are from around the world, I just wanted to say that we've got Disan who's in Rwanda. So over here. And then we've also got Tristan from Stockholm. So I'll put Tristan up there in Sweden. That's great.

HJ: Yeah, we're hitting an international audience. We love it. So keep letting us know where you are, do the widgets, and we just love hearing from you. Keep it coming.

KAREN FOLEY: We really do love having your selfies. Please keep those sending to us. But please, do stop the spam.

John, on a more serious note then, you have done a massive study with the HEA, the Higher Education Academy, all about Students First and Part-time Matters. So you've been studying really what our students are experiencing. And you've drawn out some key themes as good studies often do.

So I wondered if you could talk a little bit about this. Because the OU had this campaign about students first, and about putting students first, and about part-time really mattering. So those two sort of ideas, I guess. How do you envisage them? Do they go together? Are they quite separate things? How are you researching them?

JOHN BUTCHER: I think they're very important that they're seen together. We did a big study for the Higher Education Academy. It was published in July. We had survey responses back from about 3,000 students across the United Kingdom. So this is quite important, I think. We've stretched out to all areas of the country. And we followed up those 3,000 responses with 50 telephone interviews with students.

And I think the numbers are important because the reason we did this study is that there's been quite a well-publicized and rather dramatic decline in part-time numbers.

And if I can just give some illustration of that at the moment with our Duplo, which just happens to be...

KAREN FOLEY: We had to ban PowerPoint because it was a bit boring.

JOHN BUTCHER: Happens to be to hand here. Yeah. So part-time higher education was really thriving in the UK until about 2005. The numbers were going up every year. We had a period of plateau then. And from about 2010 unfortunately, the number started to go down. And the significance is, if we go back to 2010 - and that represents part-time numbers - there were about 900,000 part-time learners. So a very vibrant sector, really.

And since then, we've lost not just 2, but 300,000 students. So currently, we're down to 600,000 part-time learners. Which means that these students have really lost out, I think, on

all those kind of transformative opportunities that we know education can provide. So there's a bigger campaign going on at the University and other universities as well around this.

And I think the important thing to understand is that much of that decline has been in England. So England has suffered a 40% decline. And the reason that's important, if I can just go for the last time to my Duplo, is that if we take... that's the whole kind of part-time sector across the UK. Probably that and a bit more represents England. So it's by far the highest proportion of students.

So if we've lost 42% of them in that time, that's really impacted our numbers, I think. So it's a serious issue.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. So you were looking at why this was. What are some of the reasons? I mean obviously, finance is going to be a massive thing. But it's not the only one, is it?

JOHN BUTCHER: No, it's not. Students talked a lot about finance. And I think the really interesting thing, if I can just start off with this, is we asked all our part-time students, had you considered studying full-time?

And almost all of them said they would much have preferred if their personal circumstances had allowed to study full-time and the reason they couldn't was financial. So they were probably adult learners. They were juggling families. They were juggling work commitments. They will paying mortgages, or rent, or whatever. They didn't feel they could take the risk as it were going back to university as an adult student. So finances were important.

I think the English factor there is particularly important because students in England cannot get any maintenance support for part-time study. Neither a maintenance loan or maintenance grant. So obviously, how you pay for this becomes important then. That might be something that students online are interested in, I think, in commenting upon.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, we asked our audience at home to put some things into our Wordle, our word cloud. And I'd like to show you this.

This is all about barriers to studying full-time. So let's have a look at what some of these things were. Things like time and money, work, being a carer, all these sorts of issues, I guess, that are really impacting.

John, looking at some of this, because there's a lot of variety there, what would you say some of the key sorts of things were in terms of these barriers?

JOHN BUTCHER: I think what we found out from our research, and I think it's reflected in other research as well - and again, students online might be interested in commenting on this - is the majority of part-time students are women. Half of those talk about having caring responsibilities, whether for their own children or older relatives, which impacts on their studies.

The majority of students, particularly the non-OU part-time students, because we didn't just talk to OU students. But the majority of non-OU students were the first in their families to go on to higher education. So there's a real kind of widening participation audience there, which I think is important.

And I think the final numbers thing I'd want to say is that 22% of our respondents talked about having a disability or a long-term health impairment. And that's the kind of thing that had prevented them from studying full-time. Full-time simply wasn't flexible enough to meet their needs. So I think some important issues there around kind of the challenges students face to cope with studying higher education.

KAREN FOLEY: Some situations are very unique. I know one of our viewers is talking how they're home educating five children. And that, obviously, means that they can't. But there are these very sort of unique things that OU students as well as other students doing distance education are having to face.

And obviously in CICP, you're dealing with access and enabling students to do this. What sorts of things might people come across? And what sort of solutions are there that the OU are looking at?

JOHN BUTCHER: Well, I think the first thing is students engaged in part-time higher education have already made the most difficult decision, really. So they've made a commitment, and they're there. So that's the biggest step, I think.

I think secondly is absolutely choosing both the right subject you wish to study and the right level at your starting point. So your needs are met and you're enthused by the subject you wish to study.

So there may well be students out there who are about to start on one of the Open University's access modules. And that will really prepare them, give them confidence, particularly important for adult learners who might not have studied for a while to succeed then in their undergraduate careers. So I think having made that first step is important.

And obviously with the Open University, it can be more flexible than traditional universities. So it can fit in around the very difficult juggling acts that students have to do. We know that from our research, people are juggling lots of children, numbers of part-time jobs, et cetera, et cetera. It's not easy. But I think the flexibility of being able to study at your own pace - in the evening, early in the morning, whatever - is a real advantage. So they've made the right choice I think.

KAREN FOLEY: You're using the words "student" and "learners." And we're going to have another interactive tool or a widget coming up that says, do you describe yourself as a student, yes or no? So I'd like to hear what you think about that. But that language, that discourse.

And I think it's one thing that also strikes me about the OU. People say, I'm studying with the OU. Or, I am at a university. There's this whole idea about language and how we position ourselves. In terms of that part-timeness of things and people having multiple identities, how do you conceptualise people considering themselves as students and part of the student community?

JOHN BUTCHER: Well, this I have to say was quite a shock to us. Because we asked this question in the research, do you, as a part-time student, consider yourself, would you talk about yourself as a student?

And I have to say, the majority of part-time students didn't. They didn't consider that they had a student identity, which I think is quite important. Interestingly, they had a picture of students as being young and full-time.

We spoke to memorably one 21-year-old student. I'll say that again, 21-year-old, who felt that students were younger than him.

KAREN FOLEY: Wow.

JOHN BUTCHER: So there's a real kind of interesting conception, I think, around what students actually mean.

I think the crucial thing coming out with the student identity is lots of people did talk about juggling different identities. So they did talk about having to wear two hats or juggle being a mum or parent or juggle being a worker with being a student. But certainly, it wasn't kind of the top of their identity, which is I think important.

And the second thing I think that's very important for students embarking on their studies now is many part-time students talked about not really feeling part of a student community.

Now in full-time higher education, this is exactly what you'd expect. You'd expect lots of kind of peer support and lots of university systems to support you. Clearly, I think part-time students do feel a bit excluded from that. And that's tough. It suits some students. They want to do things on their own. But I think other students would really benefit from that peer support. So probably all universities need to be a bit better at thinking about how to provide that, I think.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, I guess this is our solution, too. That sort of idea.

JOHN BUTCHER: Indeed.

KAREN FOLEY: And I'm going to show you the widget about how you've been voting for this. And interestingly, John, our students do agree that they're saying that they feel that they are a student. 47% agreeing with that, which is a very, very, big, sorry, 47% agreeing with that, which is a very big increase on the scale as you can see.

And maybe that is because they're at this event and part of a community. Maybe they are slightly different.

JOHN BUTCHER: They're kind of engaged already, really, aren't they?

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, exactly. But it is great to see that you do feel part of a community, because that's exactly what we want. And without further ado, I'm going to go to the social media desk now to see what you've been talking about, and what has a particular resonance maybe for the audience at home.

HELEN: A lot of what John has been saying is being echoed in the chat. It's lots of people saying that they did start out studying full-time, but they found that for whatever reason it wasn't for them or they had a life event that prevented them from staying full-time. So then they turned to part-time study.

And for a lot of people, there wasn't any other option. They left school with no qualifications. They decided they wanted to study later on in life, perhaps when they had children and were working full-time. So part-time study was the only way to go, really.

And I think that's what you did, isn't it, HJ?

HJ: Yes. Well, I was one of those people who didn't really have an option for university. Location, finances, there's all these things that come with it that a lot of people find difficult. So that's why I think OU is a fantastic institution. It's flexible. You can do it part-time. You can do it on the bus and things like that. So being able to do that. It's really inspiring to hear how other people as well have those experiences, how they've had problems going to a brick university or in their lives, and the OU has really given them something to go for.

And a lot of people are very determined, very passionate about the OU and their studies. But I mean, we really love hearing about it. And we'd love for it to keep coming in. And yeah, just keep it up, guys. And yes, we're all very determined. We're all going to get our degrees. And yeah, we are loving hearing the stories.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, wonderful. Well, I wanted to pick up on that theme and talk about motivation, and what's motivating people to study. And for those of you who say that you don't describe yourself as a student, I'd be very interested in knowing maybe if it's because there's another aspect of identity that's more important than that, or what your thoughts are around that. That will be very interesting to know.

But John, one of the things that you looked at in your study was motivation and why people are studying and what they're doing. And again, this may be something that our audience at home is resonating with. What were the key findings there?

JOHN BUTCHER: I think there were three. And I think we were not surprised by this, but the balance between these three was kind of closer than we expected, really.

So the first, one, which all the literature would attest to is employability. People were looking to gain a qualification as a part-time student to either improve their job prospects or to shift from a relatively low-paid job to a better job.

And they were doing it not just I think to improve their own circumstances, but that of their families as well. So a real commitment to kind of transforming their lives, really. So the employability one is an important one. But it wasn't the only one.

And we had lots of students saying to us they were studying part-time because they loved their subject. They had not been able, perhaps to study at 18 or, as was attested previously, maybe they started in full-time and it didn't work out for them, so they've gone part-time now.

Interesting, lots of particularly women who felt they had missed out earlier and were taking the opportunity to study. And many of those - not just women, dads as well - who were saying, we're really doing this because we want to be a good role model for our own children or to help our children with their school work. So lots of kind of things there.

And the final one really, particularly with older students, was the notion of wanting an intellectual challenge. So wanting to keep active. And maybe to take on something that they'd missed out on before. Interestingly, we encountered quite a few students doing the arts who had been kind of warned off doing the arts by their parents 30 years previously and had finally got around to it. So lots of different things there.

KAREN FOLEY: Didn't put Richard Brown off before. His parents said that he couldn't get through these books and he went and read them all. And look where that got him.

JOHN BUTCHER: Indeed.

KAREN FOLEY: So that's it. And let us know at home what your motivation is in terms of why you might be studying with the OU. Or if you're an academic in the OU as well, because we've got a whole community of people out there engaging with the chat. Let us know what's inspiring you and moving you forward.

I wanted to return in the last five minutes of the session, John, to talk about the sort of idea about finances. And also, about OU's position in terms of the HE sector, in terms of where you're saying there's this decrease in terms of numbers of students studying part-time. You're arguing that a lot of it is down, I guess, to finance.

And we've got a widget here about people being informed about those options there. Can you tell us a little bit about how that's sort of happening?

JOHN BUTCHER: I think the challenge really is that for full-time students, the market has really stabilised after the fees rose in 2012, but the part-time market is the one that's really dropped through the floor. And I think the issue there that students kept telling us was that they weren't willing to risk going into debt to fund their studies. So lots of students were borrowing money from family members or taking on personal debt. And certainly, what came through is that not that many students knew about the fact that there were part-time tuition loans available to support part-time study, providing you're studying at a certain intensity.

And I think what has happened in the sector is that there's loads of information for full-time students and thinking about tuition loans. It's much more difficult to find it for part-time students. So I'd be really interested to know if people logging on in the UK know about loans for part-time study.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. And if they don't, where can they find information out about this?

JOHN BUTCHER: Well, I think the key thing is through the OU website there's some really good information from the Student Registration and Fees team, or students out can contact their local Student Support team as well. So there's plenty of information there.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, we'll see what everyone at home thinks in just a minute. But also, I wanted to ask you about the OU's position in this. Because you mentioned that it's not the same. So you were obviously surveying a lot of people, both internally who were OU students, as well as others. How has things affected the OU?

JOHN BUTCHER: Well, I think it has to be said the bigger decline has been in the non-OU numbers of part-time students. So while the OU has declined a little, other universities - and there are some very famous universities who do lots of part-time provision - have suffered rather more. So the net result of that is the proportion of part-time students studying with the OU in the sector has actually risen. So students out there are part of a very solid community, I think.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. And community was certainly one thing I think that our audience at home really appreciated feeling part of. And for those just logging in today, because we're getting people logging in all the time, welcome to the Student Hub Live. And I hope you're enjoying the session so far.

Well, I'd like to have a look at that widget in a second just to see how well people felt informed about the finances side of things. But I'd just like to conclude I guess with some of the emergent themes that you had from the study about knowledge gaps and disciplinary differences. Some of the things that I guess you learned that you're now taking to the HE sector. Because this, of course, was interesting from an OU perspective, but it was also informing the higher education market.

JOHN BUTCHER: I think interestingly, the disciplines that students choose to study part-time can be a real proxy for whether they want kind of work-related upskilling. And sometimes, that is quite gendered. So we had lots of men doing IT and computing and engineering to get on in their jobs and lots of women doing education and health to perhaps get employment in that sector. So there is some work going on there.

But I think it's not exclusively so. And I think the real thing that came through was that sense of excitement, particularly from some of our students, who talked about finally doing something for themselves. So perhaps these were parents and they'd put everything to one side while they raised their children. We had some fascinating quotations from part-time students who said I'll just sent my two kids off to traditional university, now I'm allowing myself to study part-time. So there's a real sense that it provides an opportunity for people who are waiting for this.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. Well, let's have a look at that widget, because we asked people about the extent to which they felt informed about finances before they started studying. And we can see here that a lot of them, well, they are quite organised to be honest. They've got tidy desks. Very conscientious students and participants out there. So some people agree, but also quite a lot of people are disagreeing. There's quite a lot of spectrum, I guess, in terms of this response. So that's very interesting to see as well.

So if people aren't aware of their options, then they can find out more about those.

JOHN BUTCHER: There is financial support available, so seek it out.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. Well, it's time to wrap up now. That's been a really, really interesting talk. And thank you for coming along to the Student Hub Live, John.

JOHN BUTCHER: Thank you.

KAREN FOLEY: And I think aside from talking about the research and some of the ways that you're doing that and what the OU is feeding back into that wider community, it's also really reassuring to our students right at this very time of feeling exactly the same way with a lot of those motivations and a lot of those anxieties and aspirations as well in terms of why they're choosing to study with the Open University.

Lovely. Well, thank you very much for that. Now, we're going to do something a little bit different. Because it's time for the Philosophy Cafe. And so we need a philosopher. And I have one here, the head of department in fact. Alex. Alex, welcome to the Student Hub Live.

ALEX: Hello.

KAREN FOLEY: Hello. So the Philosophy Cafe. We're going to have a chat. This is a chat-based function. What we've challenged the Philosophy department to do is we're going to have a few of these. We're going to have a chat on the chat box. So if you are watching only, this might be a bit boring for you. You might want to watch and engage, and follow the chat, and participate as well. And you can do that by going back to the website and selecting 'live and interactive'.

You've posed a question to us that people are going to chat about. And then you're going to sit and chat with them and see what they say about it. Now, tell me, what's this all about?

ALEX: Well, a lot of people are curious about philosophy. Everybody thinks, oh, what's that?

But it's very hard to give a simple answer as to what philosophy is. And even if you ask philosophers... if you ask 10 philosophers what philosophy is, you'll get 20 answers.

KAREN FOLEY: It takes a long time as well.

ALEX: So the best way to find out what philosophy is, is to actually do it. So that's the idea behind these little cafes, is to do it.

KAREN FOLEY: And we can all do philosophy, can't we?

ALEX: Yes, I think that's the idea. It's not an exclusive...

KAREN FOLEY: You can't do it well or not well, can you?

ALEX: One of the reasons it's so hard is that it isn't something that you only do in the context of formal study of a philosophy module. You can find people doing philosophy anywhere - in sciences, social sciences, the humanities, everyday life for that matter.

KAREN FOLEY: So you pose these complex questions that we'll have a think about. And I'm never very clear on the answer or what happens. What have you asked our audience to think about today?

ALEX: It's not meant to be complex. It's meant to be a simple question. You can make it complex in your answers if you want.

It's about a branch of philosophy called epistemology, which is the study of knowledge. The fancy Greek word for the study of knowledge. And that's something that everybody is interested in, at least if they're in a university. Because how we acquire knowledge is something that should interest everybody, philosophers or not.

There is what I've called the bonus question for those who can see it, is where the philosophy gets really interesting. But essentially, I'm asking participants to say, basically, to come up with a list of ways in which we can be entitled to the beliefs that we hold.

KAREN FOLEY: Wonderful. Well, we're going to see that slide, and then we're going to have a chat about it. And Alex, you're going to chat as well with the audience, aren't you, on our social media desk?

And then we're going to be back in 15 minutes to draw some conclusions from that talk. And you'll see that slide coming up on the screen about what we would like you to chat about. Grab a cup of tea in the break as well, because we will be back shortly afterwards as well. And I look forward to hearing how this chat goes. So we'll see you in about 15 minutes.

[MUSIC PLAYING]