

Reconceptualising part-time adult learning in higher education: salutary lessons from England

Dr John Butcher ,The Open University, UK

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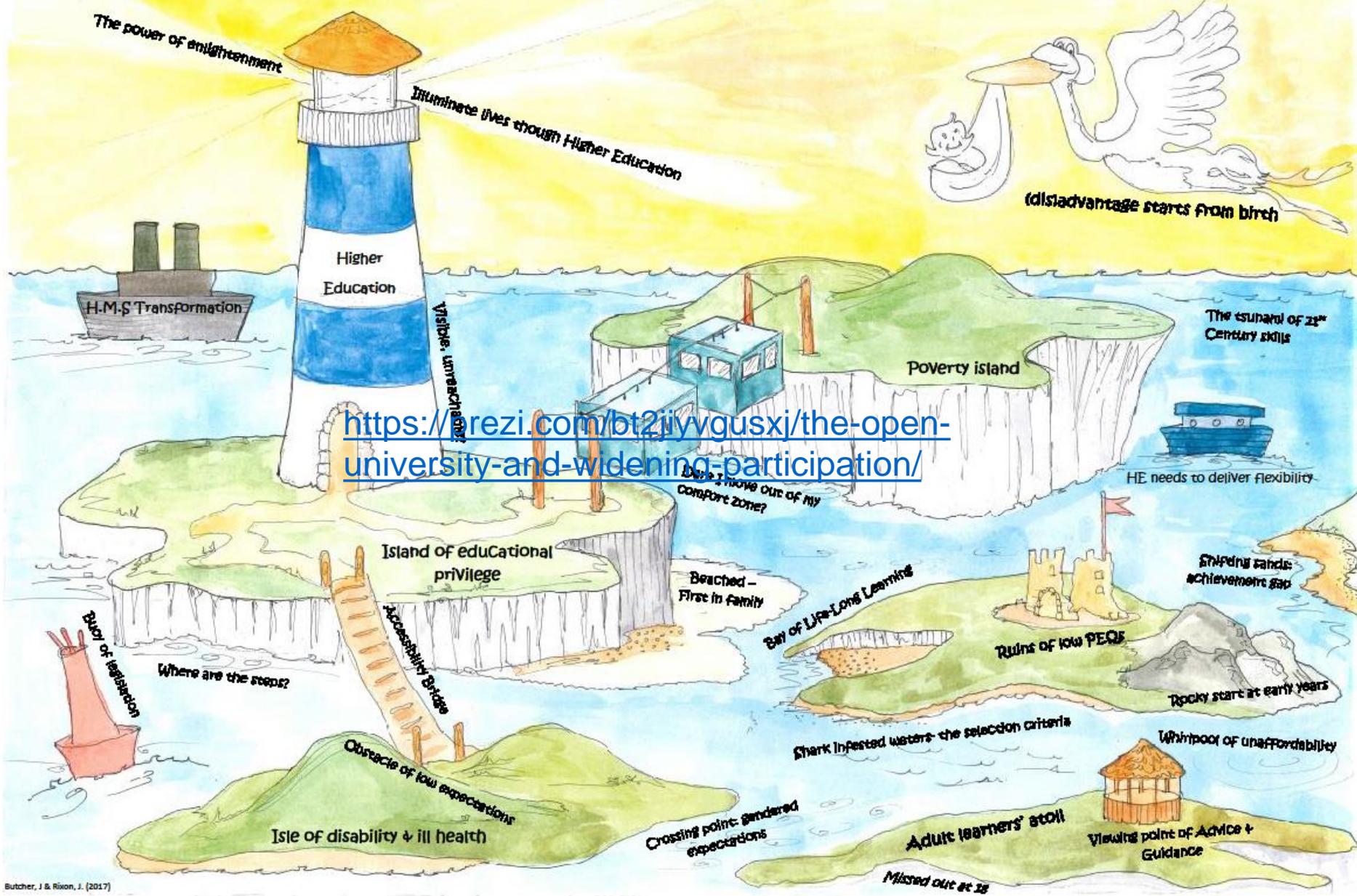
My context: The Open University



- Largest provider of HE in the UK
- Widening participation mission
- Distance learning
- Blended approach
- Open entry (including Access programme)
- Adult learners
- Primarily part-time



Why Widening Participation is still necessary?



WHY RECONCEPTUALISATION IS NEEDED

Dramatic decline (61%) in number of part-time adult HE students in England since 2012

Since 2012, 8% rise in disadvantaged 18 year olds BUT 17% fewer learners from disadvantaged backgrounds entering HE = **'invisible' part-timers**

Part-time adult HE market not **'fit for WP purpose'** - the needs of part-time adult learners **not met**

Policy levers

Office For Fair Access (2017)

‘All institutions have a responsibility to consider how they might work to support part-time and mature learners...you should consider the different barriers mature learners may face in accessing, succeeding in and progressing from higher education...fall since 2010 deeply worrying’

Minister for Universities (2018)

‘Dramatic, unacceptable decline’

None of this is new...

The experience of mature students in higher education in England remains (depressingly) relevant. Over 40 years ago HE literature assumed undergraduates are single, unfamiliar with employment, and aged 18-22. It laments the assumption that the world of students is a young world:

‘Handbooks of advice for new students may classify their contents under headings of ‘Sex’ or ‘Managing money’, but the sections are unlikely to refer to the difficulties of maintaining a marriage or paying a mortgage.’ (Challis, 1976, 209)

Evidence from UK, US, Australia that part-time **adult learners**:

- Are from **most disadvantaged** backgrounds
- Lack **confidence**
- Are **time-poor**
- Are **financially-stretched**
- **Dropout earlier**

BUT

- Are motivated by **life transitions**
- Are already **working**, and remain so while studying
- Lack **inspiration** rather than **aspiration**
- Face a '**Hobson's choice**' of part-time or nothing

(ARC, 2013, McAllister, 1998, Boylan, 2002, McKay & Devlin, 2014, Blair & McPake, 1995, Butcher, 2015)

Desk-based research

Synthesis review of 2 research reports:

1. 'Shoe-horned and Side-lined?' (2015)
2. 'Understanding the impact of outreach on access to HE for adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds' (2017)

1. HEA Report

Online survey
(1567
responses)
England,
Scotland & N.
Ireland

1134 non-OU
responses, 433
OU responses

22 telephone
interviews

Developed from
previous Welsh
study

2. OFFA Report

5 case studies
(Bristol, Birkbeck,
Leeds, Open x 2)

STEM
preparedness

Transition into Arts
Introductory Social
Science

Community
Engagement

Free online
resources

Threatened part-time adult learners

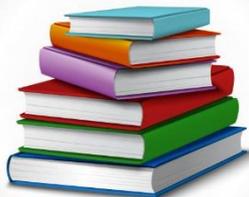
Adult learners' priorities have to be juggled – HE is not the first, or only priority



Adult learners may study to upskill, to meet a personal need, to seize a second chance...not homogeneous

Adult learners may be isolated from peers, disabled, in chronic health, ignorant of financial & academic support,

HEIs may be insufficiently flexible: timetabling, assessment deadlines, mitigating circumstances...



WHAT HAS CHANGED: FINANCE

High **fees** in England (since 2012) a significant barrier for adults

Part-time adult students more **debt-averse**, more affected by loss of maintenance grant

The **language** issue: Is the term 'loan' a barrier for part-time adult students

ARE ASSERTIONS OF ‘FLEXIBILITY’ & ‘CHOICE’ SUFFICIENT?

Sector distortion currently prioritising **full-time** HE needs to be addressed: a rhetoric of ‘flexibility’ (see Barnett, 2014, Ryan & Tilbury, 2013) is not enough to widen access

‘**Choice**’ is an empty slogan for geographically-immobile adult learners who can only access HE part-time

Part-time adult learners make decisions about HE as a **discretionary purchase** based on: time; money; personal factors; learning mode and institution

WHAT NEEDS TO IMPROVE? INFORMATION, ADVICE & GUIDANCE

Part-time adult learners **inadequately served** by current IAG - out of scope of UCAS cycle – but complex individual needs require **transparent IAG**

This impact amplified by **complexity** of offer/funding (contrast with Scotland)

DO CURRENT METRICS HELP?



Part-time adult learners are **poorly served** by metrics:

League tables, Teaching Excellence Framework, Destination of Learners in HE survey all discourage HEIs from targeting non-full-time provision: measurable national targets for part-timers could be set

Pressing need for credible metrics around '**adding value/distance travelled**', especially for the 31% part-time learners with low entry qualifications, 81% working full-time and 61% with family commitments

Does the division of '**young**' and **adult** students need a rethink? Is the **separation** of full and part-time students still meaningful?

Universities need to:

- Recognise adult students' lack of confidence & impact of prior experience (failure?)
- Prepare adult learners through personalised interdisciplinary approaches and embedded study skills
- Acknowledge adult students need to transition across 'separate worlds...not belonging'
- Embrace diversity but support English as an Additional Language
- Signpost free support, offer free tasters, impartial Information, Advice and Guidance
- Take the HE learning to where the adults are...
- Design-in 'tiny steps' for slow, haphazard journeys



SO, RECONCEPTUALISE, BUT...

Nothing will change until the funding is sorted...

Targeted funding could enable HEIs to **innovate** to better meet the need for personalised flexibility of part-time & adult learners

Need to re-incentivise with financial support (to institution, or direct to student, or employer co-funding)

Solution: a *flexible learning incentive* = reduce part-time fees and thereby save taxpayer – redesign away from ‘full-time’ one-size-fits-all

Recommendations

In order to reconceptualise part-time adult HE learning:

- Universities must change: use evidence from part-time learners to design-in flexibility and engage adults in a personalised learning experience that can respond to individual needs
- Policy makers must engage with part-time adult learners and be mindful of needs rather than imposing one-size fits all diktats (eg fees, metrics)
- Make part-time adult learners visible in WP discourses, be unapologetic that HE is not all about 18 year-olds

Thank you

john.butcher@open.ac.uk

@access_observe

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