

TOWARDS FLEXIBILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Title and Presenter:

Part-time undergraduate success: Is flexibility the answer?

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Sub Theme & Paper Type:

Flexible People– Presentation

Abstract:

Professor Christine King was commissioned by John Denham to report on the current state of part-time provision and make recommendations as part of the debate on the future of Higher Education. Flexibility is a key theme within this report and indeed 'flexible' and 'flexibility' are used 45 times. King writes:

If we accept that part-time higher education study is central to UK's ambition to be a leader in world class skills ... then those committed to the realisation of this vision will want to accelerate this demand-led transition from traditional rigid constructions to greater flexibility in organisational structure as well as curriculum delivery (2008: 5)

What does this move towards flexible provision by the sector and institutions mean to part-time students? How do we ensure that this vision of flexible provision advantages students and enables more of them to become successful/completed students? How can the move toward flexibility remove the current hierarchy between full-time and part-time provision? Will flexibility change the institutional habitus of a full-time focussed university that impacts negatively on part-time student identity? Can a more flexible provision contribute to attracting a more diverse student population across all modes of study?

Part-time students are already flexible, as are their families and friendship networks. The majority juggle families, work and study commitments and have to be flexible within these areas to develop strategies for success.

By reporting findings from a qualitative research project with completed part-time undergraduates this presentation will make audible the student voice, giving the student perspective on how they negotiate their way through the HE system currently designed for full-time students.

King advises that we:

Develop policy with caution and in consultation with the sector to guard against unintended consequences and social inequities for individuals or groups of individuals who wish or need to study part-time (2008:11).

Within the current economic climate a very different agenda is emerging, where unemployment is growing and retraining will be vital, but, in many cases, prevented by the withdrawal of funding for ELQs, it is important that the student voice is heard within this move towards flexibility. This presentation will draw on my research into the factors that make part-time students successful and will emphasise the need to allow their authentic voice to be heard in order to ensure that their real needs are paramount in this debate.

King, C (2008) *Part-time Study in Higher Education* <http://www.dius.gov.uk/policy/HE-debate.html>