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Higher education in UK, does it need change?

BRITISH higher education is based on a series of dubious, but generally unquestioned, assumptions. Some of these assumptions are medieval in origin, while others only became firmly established when the system was expanded in the 1960s.

It is assumed that higher education is best pursued on a full-time basis.

It is assumed that higher education should follow immediately after school and that it should be designed for a select group of highly certificated 18- or 19-year-olds.

It is assumed that higher education should ideally be residential, with students moving away from their parents' homes and being funded to do so by the state (until recently it was believed that higher education should be confined to universities, preferably collegiate ones sited in cathedral cities or on country estates).

And it is assumed that higher education should, in the first instance, last for three or four years, with the recipient taking a specified course and being presented with a degree at the end of this period.

Taken together, these assumptions sustain a dominant but narrow interpretation of higher education. It is, of course, not the only interpretation.

National statistics in U K show that more than one third of higher education students are currently studying part-time (about one quarter of these are with the Open Uni-

versity), that nearly one third are taking courses which do not lead to degrees or postgraduate qualifications, and that more than half are studying outside universities.

Neither is it particularly realistic. For example, full-time students seldom study full time in the sense that those in full-time employment can be said to be working full time. They enjoy long summer vacations and have a great deal of spare time during terms (some of it used to take up part-time employment).

But full-time residential degree study undoubtedly remains the norm. It creates and conditions the image of higher education in the public eye and absorbs the bulk of the resources available.

Presumably, this model must have had considerable advantages, or it would not have developed and stayed with us for so long. Indeed, it still remains a desirable method for teaching certain kinds of things to certain people in certain circumstances.

But is it the best approach we have available now for enabling as many people as possible to cope with rapidly changing technological, economic and social conditions?

Surely a more flexible strategy for higher education, based to a far greater extent on part-time, non-residential and non-degree forms of provision, and directed at least as much at adults as at school-leavers, would be more valuable to both

individual and society

Such a flexible, part-time re-current strategy for higher education would:

a) Be more accessible to those who, because of employment, domestic responsibility or other reasons, are unable or unwilling to commit themselves to three or more years of full-time study.

b) Be cheaper, since residential accommodation would not be needed; students would not be removed from the labour force and they (or their employers) would tend to pay a greater proportion of their costs directly.

c) Be more relevant, enabling study to be pursued alongside work or other activities, making use of peoples' experience and allowing them to readily apply what they learn in the real world.