

Paper for Open University Conference 26.05.2011

Caring for Learning and Learning for Carers¹

By

Dr Hywel Francis MP

Thank you for your invitation to speak at this conference which I am sure will be most instructive in exploring new learning opportunities with and for carers.

I have chosen to talk to you on the theme of 'caring for learning and learning for carers'.

This is not however an academic paper, it is a 'thought piece' from a one-time adult education tutor, a one-time carer and a current backbench Member of Parliament.

Could I at the outset pay tribute to the Open University for the unique way you have historically addressed the question of widening and deepening access to higher education and in particular to my good friend and one-time colleague, Rob Humphreys, now Director of the Open University in Wales. We worked together nearly two decades ago on the development on the Community University of the Valleys, a radical access programme at the time, with the OU as a key partner.

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In approaching this subject, I am reminded of two critical moments in my Aberavon Constituency which reinforced for me my belief that 'the personal is the political'.

Firstly, on National Carers Day in December 2003, I met with young parents of autistic children who told me all they wanted for themselves, as one of them said, was 'the right to an ordinary life.'²

¹ A paper delivered at the Open University Conference 'Higher education for students with caring responsibilities – inspiration, flexibility and support' at Walton Hall, Milton Keynes on 26th May 2011

² This was the title of the Annual Bevan Foundation lecture which I gave in 2005. Copies of this lecture are available from the Foundation, The Innovation Centre, Festival Drive, Ebbw Vale, Blaenau Gwent, NP23 8XA

At that meeting with carers I decided that the Private Members' Bill which I was considering at the time would be about ensuring that carers should have better access to information about their own life chances, through education, training, work and leisure.

That was the first step towards my Carers Equal Opportunities Act of 2004 – and every step along the way was taken in partnership with carers organisations from my Constituency, along with Carers Wales and Carers UK.

I should add that Emily Holzhausen of Carers UK who is speaking after me today was pivotal in building that crucial partnership between Parliamentarians and civil society which can result in progressive enabling legislation.

And secondly my other critical moment, more recently, was Michael Sheen's inspirational and highly acclaimed open-air play 'The Passion', a modern day secular version of the Easter Story told through the ordinary and extraordinary lives of the people of Port Talbot, including the lives of young carers. Michael Sheen met with 'homeless people, addicts, beaten women and troubled kids'.

Summing up his approach as co-director of the play, Laura Kelly of the **Big Issue** wrote,

'The more Sheen talks, it sounds like what he really wants is a revolution by the overlooked, the ignored and the marginalised.'³

For all of us who have been fortunate to be involved in our own 'long revolution', to borrow from Raymond Williams, in that sometimes dynamic relationship between lifelong learning and democratic politics, we should of course be posing that key question of the inter-relationship between carers and the Open University.

In making that eminently sensible yet obviously revolutionary link, we are reminding ourselves of the potentially life-changing opportunities which can be provided for 'the overlooked, the ignored, the marginalised' and for carers of all ages.

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³ Laura Kelly, **The Big Issue**, April 18-24, 2011, No 762, pp12-15

Government policy makers and politicians still largely perceive Higher Education as being inhabited by 18-21 year old full-time students. Back in 1986 the head of the Welsh Higher Education Funding Council, Professor John Andrews, was asserting that it had been characterised for too long by, in his words,

‘a monastic aspect...Essentially it has been male only, residential and excessively introspective.’⁴

The civic universities, polytechnics and most of all the Open University have begun to change that. The Labour Government’s 1998 Green Paper **The Learning Age**, based on the work of Bob Fryer’s National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning (of which I was a member) proposed learning entitlements at all stages of life and this I think still has much to commend itself today.

I was impressed recently with the statement of David Hughes, the newly appointed head of NIACE, who said,

‘We need a more decisive push on higher education entitlement for low earners and part-timers’.⁵

Paradoxically, the present period of austerity and the looming funding crisis in higher education should be an opportunity for the OU and carers alike.

Against the background of the recent Browne Review which acknowledges that ‘part-time students should be treated the same as full-time students for the costs of learning’, it is now generally acknowledged that there would be no upfront payments.⁶

Add to this the clear recognition by Secretary of State Vince Cable that there was a need to ‘encourage part-timers and treat them on the same basis as full-timers’ you have a promising policy environment.⁷ **Whether this is financially sustainable is open to question.**

⁴ John Andrews, ‘Communities, Universities and the Wider Educational Scene’ in J. Elliot, H. Francis, R. Humphreys, D. Istance (eds) **Communities and their Universities: The Challenge of Lifelong Learning**, (1996) p. 108

⁵ Ian Nash, ‘Gamekeeper turned Poacher’ in **The Guardian**, 3rd May 2011, p.4

⁶ Browne Report, **Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education**, 12th Oct 2010, pp 22-23

⁷ House of Commons Debates, 12th October 2010, c 170

Leighton Andrews, the Welsh Assembly Government's Education Minister, has been even more assertive in embracing the Browne Review in relation to part-time students and with particular projects such as the Heads of the Valleys initiative. He has also confirmed that the arrangements for part-time students to access student loans will be taken forward subject to amendments to the 2004 Higher Education Act. We wait to see how far exactly he intends to develop a Wales-specific settlement for part-time students, as he has done already for full-time students.

Again, will these good intentions be financially sustainable?

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For me, the key to the future, despite current financial pressures, is how we can combine the more benign funding development for part-timers with greater flexibility of provision for carers, arguably the most pressurised and marginalised group in our society.

The excellent work of the National Extension College in recent years with and for carers is a pointer for the future. Recognising the besieged nature of their lives, the National Extension College through distance learning strategies has empowered carers to negotiate curriculum, modes of study and support structures.

Its Carers' network, sponsored by Birmingham City Council, Crossroads and Carers UK, ensures that carers can study where and when they choose, around caring responsibilities, with the support of a subject tutor and a personal mentor.

When I was Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Carers we commended this work of the National Extension College to Government, and I would also commend it to the Open University today.

As I said at the outset, caring for learning and learning for carers are synonymous, concerned as we all are about the overlooked, the ignored and the marginalised, which is still too often the predominant experience of so many carers.

To sum up the **key messages** for me are:

- **Empowering carers with their own negotiated learning**
- **Greater flexibility and greater support for carers**

- **Partnerships between the OU, carers and carers' organisations, and**
- **Greater dialogue between the OU, legislators, policy-makers and carers' organisations.**
- **And above all else, and most critically, funding for part-time students who are carers – as ever, finance is inevitably the greatest barrier facing carers wishing to study.**