The new fees and loans meant student recruitment took place in challenging circumstances. Turn over to find out how Birkbeck took up the challenge.
Birkbeck has long campaigned for part-time higher education to be given the same level of attention and resources as the full-time sector. Over the last two years we have seen campaigning success: tuition fee loans for part-time students introduced; the eligibility threshold for a loan reduced from 33 per cent to 25 per cent of a full-time course; and, after a long campaign, the repayment date for part-time loans was moved from 3.5 years after the loan is taken out to 4.5 years, meaning that the majority of Birkbeck undergraduate students will complete their degree before beginning to repay the loan.

These successes help to remove some of the barriers that our students face. However, as we began recruitment for the first intake of students eligible for the new loans, we did so against a challenging backdrop.

The 2012 challenge
Media coverage of tuition fees was highly negative and the Government television and radio campaign was aimed squarely at full-time traditional students. Information with the right tone and messages for our non-traditional, mature students was scarce, difficult to find and frequently inaccurate.

At the first open evenings this year we saw huge queues of people waiting to ask us about the loans and fees. One student told us: “I went to the DirectGov website, but for me, the key question on funding was ‘am I eligible?’ – and it was difficult to establish that.”

Knowing that our prospective students were struggling to find the information that they needed, the College embarked on a two-pronged action plan.

Our promise to students
The first part of our approach was to launch a campaign to simplify the loans information, and to give students the confidence to apply for their courses, knowing whether they were eligible for loans. Face-to-face advice is particularly important for our students, who are more likely to have complicated circumstances, such as having taken out a student loan for part of another degree that they were unable to complete. We have developed a comprehensive series of workshops and webinars to explain the system and the application process.

Sustained lobbying
The second line of action was to continue lobbying of Government,
Nicola Shelley
Law (LLB)

For many years, Nicola Shelley had been thinking about university study. She received a leaflet from her daughter’s primary school to say that Birkbeck would be giving a talk about studying as a mature learner.

Nicola explains: “After the talk at my daughter’s school I came to several of the talks at Birkbeck and found out more about the fees and finance. I had no idea about the finances before, but once it had been explained, I knew that taking the loan was the best option for me. When it was explained that I won’t have to repay any of the loan until after I finish studying, and even then, only if I am earning over £21,000, I realised that, although I don’t really want to have the debt, it works out better for me. I hadn’t realised until we did the calculations that the monthly repayments would be so low. That made me confident that I would be able to manage them.”

Nicola concludes: “It’s important for me that my kids see me study. They’re extremely excited for me – my daughter has been telling everyone. No-one in the family’s ever had a degree – it’ll be a first.”

For information about fees and loans, visit: [www.bbk.ac.uk/fees](http://www.bbk.ac.uk/fees)
To find out about talks for prospective students, visit: [www.bbk.ac.uk/tryit](http://www.bbk.ac.uk/tryit)

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the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and relevant higher education bodies, particularly Universities UK (UUK), UCAS and the Student Loans Company (SLC).

Timeliness and clarity of SLC loan application processes and visibility of part-time courses on UCAS are key objectives for our campaign. Both UCAS and the SLC have shown themselves responsive to Birkbeck’s concerns.

Support from our community
This year we saw the power of our alumni community. In April we launched a social media campaign to highlight the poor experience being provided to part-time students. Many alumni added weight to the message by tweeting their support, and a group of illustrious Birkbeck alumni wrote a joint letter, which was published in The Guardian, setting out why they supported our campaign.

As we come to terms with the 2012 year of change, we are delighted that BIS has commissioned UUK, the umbrella organisation representing the higher education sector, to set up a commission, which will look at the complex issues surrounding the mainstreaming of part-time study and produce a set of recommendations. We are particularly pleased that Professor Eric Thomas, President of UUK and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bristol, will lead the commission, on which Birkbeck will be represented.

As we head into the second year of recruitment under the new system we will work with this commission, and continue our broader campaign to ensure that second-chance students are not given a second-rate experience as they start out on their student journey.

By Bryony Merritt