The last word

Mary Curnock Cook, Chief Executive of UCAS, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, relishes becoming a Birkbeck Fellow and joining the flexible learning revolution

I am delighted to have become a Fellow of Birkbeck this year and to discover that, four years after London’s ‘evening university’ joined UCAS’ undergraduate admissions scheme, I am now part of an ongoing revolution.

I had long been an admirer of how Birkbeck opened the gateway to higher education for those determined and motivated enough to combine degree study with day-to-day life. The stories of mature students choosing Birkbeck were remarkably similar to my own; people for whom higher education wasn’t right or practical at 18, starting careers and families, then realising it was now or never. I went to university in my 40s and it was more precious to me then, because it was a purposeful and fully committed decision.

But it was only when I looked at Birkbeck’s record-breaking UCAS acceptances over recent cycles that I knew something else must be going on too. Something incredible has happened at Birkbeck in recent years.

While ‘part-time’ numbers were falling across the higher education sector, numbers on Birkbeck’s innovative full-time evening undergraduate programmes grew by a staggering 308% between the 2011-2012 and 2013-2014 cycles, according to acceptances recorded by UCAS. The appeal of its intensive full-time courses – proving that career development and study are not mutually exclusive – has soared beyond what we might previously have thought of as its natural constituency.

Nearly 30% of new students this year were aged 18-20, and I know many universities and colleges in the UCAS scheme will be taking notice of the way Birkbeck has communicated its vision to students, backed up by a brilliantly coordinated offering.

Birkbeck’s portfolio of intensive, three-year evening undergraduate courses has been rapidly expanded to a total of 51 programmes available in the academic year 2014-2015. Its full-time evening offer is an innovative model that opens access to higher education for the students around whose needs it was designed.

It is such a privilege to be invited to become a Birkbeck Fellow. I find myself in distinguished company with many others who, like me, are impassioned about access to the rich rewards of higher education for people who, for a variety of reasons, don’t fit the normal template of school-A level-university.

Walk around Birkbeck in the evening as the lights go on and you’ll see parents taking control of their future alongside younger people determined to blend work with study. They’re all studying a subject they love, while juggling life’s necessary commitments. This fills me with optimism for the future of higher education.