From crisis to modelling the future of higher education

Birkbeck's three-year degrees go from strength to strength

Birkbeck’s three-year intensive undergraduate degree programmes, which have been offered at the College since 2010, have shown strong growth for the fourth consecutive year. The three-year degrees offer students the opportunity to graduate in the same timeframe as those at traditional daytime universities, but with the distinct advantage that they can combine their study with work and experience. Since 2012, when tuition fees were increased due to the removal of government funding, the numbers of part-time students on Birkbeck’s four-year courses have fallen dramatically, and the intensive programmes have proved so popular, particularly with non-traditional students, that they have enabled the College to survive this challenging period. The College has also demonstrated that a remuneration to its mission to make higher education accessible to all those who can benefit from it, irrespective of their background, age, and in receipt of financial support and, while an uncommitted 30% are now school leavers, 70% are mature learners. Tricia King, Pro-Vice-Chancellor Strategic Engagement and Recruitment and Director of External Relations, said: “When considering how to respond to the challenges we faced in 2012, the College never lost sight of our original mission to make higher education accessible to everyone who can benefit from it. We’re extremely proud that as our student numbers have proved so popular, particularly with non-traditional students. Once again this unique and remarkable institution has weathered a difficult time and emerged stronger.”

In August 2014, the College was shortlisted for the prestigious Times Higher Education magazine’s University of the Year 2014 award, in recognition of the success of the College’s response to the fall in part-time numbers. The College’s award entry highlighted the fact that not only have three-year intensive evening degrees saved the College, but their success and popularity at Birkbeck could lead to changes across the higher education sector. Other institutions seek ways to provide the flexibility that today’s students want. The 2013–2014 undergraduate cohort saw 60% of students on three-year programmes, as opposed to just 5% in 2011. This represents a 200% increase in the number of students completing degrees in the same timeframe as full-time students. The College has continued to highlight the importance of part-time study and the fact that, across England, numbers have fallen drastically. The courses most affected appear to have been short, entry-level undergraduate courses, which often serve as routes into higher education for the least confident students, who would be unlikely to enter university via other routes. These programmes enable students to build intellectual confidence and work towards undertaking a full degree. A Birkbeck briefing document highlighting the importance of these courses was sent to policy-makers and politicians in June 2014.

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