National Extension College's second chance students celebrate A level success outside the mainstream education system

Friday 15 August, 2014

The focus of attention following the publication yesterday of A level results in England, Wales and Northern Ireland is on 18 and 19-year-olds who studied at school or college. But among the 335,000 students taking A levels each year are thousands of adult and young learners who study for A levels as so-called private candidates. They include home-educated youngsters, adults who want a second chance at learning, people with full-time caring responsibilities and those for whom attending a conventional school or college simply isn't an option, for example because of disability or ill health.

In academic year 2013/14, around 1,300 people enrolled to study A level courses with online and distance learning provider the National Extension College (NEC). Unlike schools and colleges, NEC cannot be certain just how many students choose to sit examinations in the courses they are studying, as the students themselves make the often complicated arrangements with exam centres. NEC has asked the new education secretary Nicky Morgan to consider making changes to the responsibilities of exam boards so that private candidates have easier access to exam centres in schools and colleges.

What is clear, though, is that students learning online and at a distance achieve A level results that are at least as good as those achieved by their peers in the conventional education system, despite the challenges they face in studying for and sitting exams. The results of NEC students taking biology, one of the college's most popular subjects, are particularly good this year, with 14.3% of students achieving an A* compared to the national average of 9.4%. One of the NEC students awarded an A*in biology is 16 years old and being educated at home. Nationally, 27.5% of students taking biology achieved a grade A* or A compared with 28.6% of NEC students. (*Source:* Joint Council for Qualifications http://www.jcq.org.uk/media-centre/news-releases/stem-subjects-2014-outcomes). NEC history students have also performed well, with a 100% pass rate against the national pass rate of 99.3%.

NEC is mirroring the national trend for increasing numbers of students taking A level maths. Across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, there has been 0.9% increase in the number of candidates taking maths in 2013/14. (*Source:* Joint Council for Qualifications http://www.jcq.org.uk/media-centre/news-releases/stem-subjects-2014-outcomes). At NEC, the rise in candidates choosing this key subject is more marked, with enrolments increasing by 21.8%.

Learner case studies

Chris – history, philosophy and English Literature: 55-year old Chris from Cambridge is taking a second chance at education and received his history, philosophy and English Literature A level results yesterday. He said: 'I have had confirmation from Anglia Ruskin and I will be starting a three year degree course in English literature this September. I am very excited at the prospect! I would like to thank the NEC for such a wonderful couple of years studying for my A levels. The coursework materials, tutorial and administration support provided have been fantastic and it has truly been both a challenging yet always pleasurable experience.'

Jessica - English Literature: 22-year old Jessica from Sheffield chose to study with NEC because as a sufferer of a long-term illness, the flexibility allowed her to study at her own pace. She has achieved an A in philosophy AS and an A* in English literature A2, with 100% in all components. She says: 'I'm absolutely delighted. I will be continuing with philosophy to A2. I'm also planning on studying government and politics A level and I will hopefully be completing the entire A level in one year.'

Tom – Business studies: Tom studied for A level business studies while in prison to help prepare for his forthcoming release. He has been awarded a grade B. Prison education manager Judy, who has supported Tom throughout his studies with NEC, said: 'The NEC distance learning packages are a useful way of extending the prison curriculum for prisoners who want to study above the level of the qualifications that we are able to provide.'

Congratulating NEC students on their A level results, NEC Chief Executive Ros Morpeth, who is the *Times Educational Supplement's* FE Leader of the Year 2014, said: 'I am very proud of all our students and congratulate each one of them for their achievements. Many NEC students are studying against the odds yet still manage to achieve excellent grades. Gaining a qualification can transform lives, and we are

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delighted to have the opportunity help everyone who studies with us on the path to achieving their ambitions. Many NEC students go on higher education as mature students – representing an increasingly endangered species. They deserve our admiration and respect.'

A report on trends in access to higher education published earlier this month by Universities UK shows a fall of 47.8% in the number of students studying part-time since 2010/11. This includes a decline of 10.8% in the number of part-time students beginning undergraduate degrees in 2013/14.

Notes to editors

1. NEC offers more than 80 courses in subjects covering science, maths, the humanities, professional skills, book-keeping, education and training and creativity and the arts. Learners can choose to work towards GCSE, IGCSE, A level and accredited professional qualifications.

2. In 2013, 74% of NEC students were awarded GCSE or IGCSE grades of A* - C, compared with a national rate of 68%. Despite the widely reported fall in science grades after papers were made tougher, 73% of NEC students were awarded grades A* - C, compared with the national rate of 53.1%.

3.Three quarters of a million people have improved their career prospects and broadened their education since NEC was set up 50 years ago by social entrepreneur Michael (later Lord) Young, the founder of The Consumers' Association and one of the inspirations behind what became The Open University.

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