OPEN UNIVERSITY RENEWS MOU WITH NATIONAL EXTENSION COLLEGE

Thursday 14 September, 2017

The Open University (OU) and the National Extension College (NEC) have agreed a memorandum of understanding to campaign jointly to reverse the fall in the number of adults entering higher education.

Figures published last year by Offa (Office for Fair Access) showed a 50 per cent drop in the number of students aged over 21 going into higher education between 2006 and 2016.

The OU and NEC are both committed to helping people from low income groups or without relevant school qualifications improve their life chances through distance and lifelong learning.

They share the vision of their joint founder, Michael Young, who wanted to extend educational opportunities to people who could not “turn up regularly for ordinary classes”.

Supporting these students to achieve their goals remains central to the founding mission of both the OU and the NEC. The two organisations are committed to working together to identify what holds adult learners back and how best to remove those barriers.

They will seek to help people find their way into further and higher education by offering support and direction to the type of study which best suits their needs.

The NEC and the OU are key members of the Social Partnership Network, which involves 11 national organisations committed to lifelong learning and providing better provision to enhance social mobility and economic growth through tackling skills shortages.

Julie Gowen, Head of Projects and Communications in the Learning and Teaching Institute at the OU, said: “We believe that by sharing our expertise with the NEC we can help make a real difference to thousands of people who want to learn but, for whatever reason, did not succeed academically during their school years.

“Higher education has always been a key factor in improving lives. But as we enter a new machine age, where old jobs will be swept away by the advance of automation, learning new skills throughout a career will be more important than ever.”

Dr Ros Morpeth, Chief Executive of the NEC, said: “Increasingly, second-chance learning doesn’t just make a difference to individual lives and families. It makes a difference at national level too.

“The barriers to second chance learning created by recent reforms in the further and higher education sectors make it more important than ever for the OU and NEC, with their shared ethos, to create clear pathways for adults from GCSE to postgraduate level.”

The NEC was established 50 years ago as a forerunner to The Open University. It specialises in school years' qualifications such as GCSEs and A-levels and has a long history of encouraging its students to enter higher education, many at the OU.

NEC and OU students can be people with caring responsibilities, full-time employees, mothers, fathers, retired people, people with a disability; people from all backgrounds, ages and cultures who need the flexibility distance learning offers.

Case studies

Ex-RAF Robert Coleman, Physics A level with NEC and an engineering degree with the OU

Robert Coleman took A level Physics with NEC to help prepare for his return to civilian life. In autumn 2017, he’s starting an engineering degree at the OU, studying while working in the aerospace industry. He says: “If you’re the slightest bit interested in science and technology, study physics. It explains lots of things that most of us take for granted, from how to make a safe electric toothbrush charger to how noise-cancelling in headphones works.”

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Charity manager Alison Gentleman, French A level with NEC and considering a degree with the OU

Wateraid international communications manager Alison Gentleman studied A level French with NEC, completing her course in nine months and sitting the exam at NEC's partner exam centre in Gravesend in summer 2017. Now she can talk to her colleagues in West Africa in their own language. She says: 'When you learn a language, it's like unlocking the door to a whole new culture and mindset. I may need something more structured to continue learning grammar, so I'm thinking about signing up with the OU."

Former OU science tutor Anne Thoday studying A level French with NEC in retirement

Anne Thoday worked for the OU for many years as a science tutor and student adviser. Whenever students asked where they could study A levels and GCSEs, she recommended NEC. Students spoke highly about NEC's course materials and model of tutor support. Now retired, she has become an NEC student herself, studying A level French.

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