

NR030MD

Widening participation

When Margaret Hodge, Minister for Life Long Learning was in Lancashire last week she asked to spend some time visiting staff and students at the University of Central Lancashire. The Vice Chancellor was delighted to be able to show his visitor around the town centre campus and in a tour of the University, Margaret Hodge was able to see for herself the green open spaces and state of the art facilities available to students.

The Minister met students from across the University at all levels, from foundation students to post graduate research students. Kevin Lilley, a student on the Combined Honours programme is combining Deaf Studies with Journalism Kevin, who is Deaf particularly chose the University of Central Lancashire because of the facilities for students with special needs are so good. He discussed the resource implications of widening participation with the Minister and was very impressed by her commitment. A former teacher and strong advocate of widening participation, Margaret Hodge was put off her own higher educational opportunity by the elitism she encountered. One of her own political achievements was overseeing the introduction of Sure Start, which provides extra health and education support for children and parents in “deprived” areas.

Philip McGladdery is a mature student with two children who has returned to education after being diagnosed dyslexic. Having felt that he had lost opportunities at school, he sees this as a chance to prove himself and having come onto a University access course with one O level has now graduated and gone on to an MSc in Psychology. Philip was full of praise for the support he had received from the University in his studies.

The Minister was impressed by the number of students who were taking part in the national mentoring scheme where University students go into school to meet and work with high school children to demonstrate that University is not for the elite, but for ordinary pupils like themselves who are prepared to work hard to achieve their potential.

Margaret Hodge was also able to meet staff at the University and together with the Vice-Chancellor, Malcolm McVicar and members of the executive team, she met Christine Kinealy, Dave Phoenix and Corrine Wattam who all confirmed that the research in which they are engaged feeds directly into the curriculum. Indeed Corinne Wattam made the point that there is perhaps more value in making research feed into the learning and wider community than getting into the “right” journals.

Dave Phoenix pressed the point of Foundation Degrees and said that the Universities were committed to the idea and had played an active part in their development and now it was the Government's turn to support them along with large employers.

A living testimony to the value of widening participation is Sarah Hobbs, a lecturer in Sports Technology who came to the university on a Foundation Course and achieved a first class honours degree in Mechanical Engineering, before taking up her current post as lecturer.

One area that particularly attracted the Minister's attention was the new IT suite in the Library and Learning Resource Service which was a hive of activity when the party paid a call there as part of the tour.

The visit was a lively and interesting event with the Minister winning approval from everyone she met. "She was very easy to talk to and was genuinely interested in everything she saw. We were even able to produce a pamphlet written by her some years ago, which had obviously been read quite a few times," said Kevin Ellard, Head of LLRS.

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