

Exploring Widening Access for Mature Age Students

International Data, Experiences and Practices



David Baker, Lucy Ellis and Nazim Uddin



EXPLORING WIDENING ACCESS FOR MATURE AGE STUDENTS

Based on current data, descriptive case studies and theoretical perspectives, *Exploring Widening Access for Mature Age Students* considers international techniques and approaches to non-traditional and mature students in Further and Higher Education.

The book provides quantitative and qualitative information regarding contemporary ways of thinking about, and institutional responses to, widening access for mature students (WAMS). It gives an up-to-date assessment of the current climate, bringing together international voices to meet the growing and urgent requirement for working age adults to remain employable as occupational competencies evolve, and describes and enumerates approaches which are in operation to attract, educate and retain students with non-traditional entry requirements. Focused on the results of an international survey and a qualitative benchmarking exercise undertaken by ten institutions from the Global North and South, this volume offers advice and examples for best practice to those working to support wider access to Further and Higher Education for WAMS.

This book provides current information and support to any education professionals who wish to understand what can be done to meet the challenge of what the future of work will look like.

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and Practices

Edited by David Baker, Lucy Ellis and Nazim Uddin



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CONTENTS

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	viii
<i>Foreword</i>	x
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
<i>List of Contributors</i>	xiii
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xix
<i>Preface: Introduction to Exploring Widening Access for Mature Age Students: International Data, Experiences and Practices</i>	xxiii
<i>Kensa Broadhurst</i>	
SECTION I	
Findings	1
1 Summary and Synthesis of Outcomes and Findings <i>David Baker, Lucy Ellis and Nazim Uddin</i>	3
SECTION II	
International Data and Benchmarking	9
2 International Data on Mature Age Students: Availability and Content <i>Kensa Broadhurst and Lucy Ellis</i>	11

vi Contents

3	Widening Access Mature Students in Higher Education: UK and Australia Survey <i>Stephen Billett and Anh Hai Le</i>	27
4	International Benchmarking Exercise on Widening Access for Mature Students: Report and Benchmarking Statements <i>Stephen Billett, David Baker, Lucy Ellis, Anh Hai Le and Nazim Uddin</i>	50
SECTION III		
Engagement and Participation		65
5	Mature Students and Coping Resources <i>Mary-Jo Appaqaq</i>	67
6	Mature Learners and Higher Education: A Perspective from University of Jos, Nigeria <i>Naandye Dabugat</i>	91
7	Life Experiences of Migrant Student Mothers as Agents of Change within Higher Education in the United Kingdom <i>Ron Cambridge</i>	114
8	Grown up Conversations: Understanding the Experience of Mature Students in Creative Arts Higher Education <i>Tim Gundry</i>	134
9	Life Experience & Knowledge Construction: Mature Students as Returners to Higher Education <i>Nick Papé, Rahaman Hasan and Nazim Uddin</i>	148
10	Widening Access: Indigenous Australian Mature-Aged Students in Higher Education <i>Thu D Pham, Angela Baeza Peña, Peter J Anderson and Levon E Blue</i>	157

11	Pathways That Enable Equity in Higher Education: An Overview of the Open Foundation Programme at the University of Newcastle, Australia and the Experiences of Mature-Age, First-in-Family, Regional, and Online Students	172
	<i>Anna Bennett and Cathy Stone</i>	
12	Cultural Advances in the Classroom: Practice, Marketing and Global Domesticity for WAMS	183
	<i>Rebekah Okpoti</i>	
SECTION IV		
Curriculum and Pedagogic Practices		193
13	Social Media: The Bridge Between Education & the Workplace for Mature Students	195
	<i>Bruce A J McLauchlan</i>	
14	The Transformational Role of Tutoring at the Autonomous University of Chihuahua	212
	<i>César Eduardo Gutiérrez Jurado, Ivonne Medina-Chávez and Fidel González-Quiñones</i>	
15	A Community of Inquiry Study – Mature Students’ Experience	223
	<i>Damien Homer</i>	
16	Supporting Mature Students Longitudinally across the Academic Lifecycle	244
	<i>Gemma Standen</i>	
17	Representational Realities: Understanding the 21+ Performing Arts Student Journey in England	259
	<i>Mark Hunter and Javeria Khadija Shah</i>	
18	Theoretical Perspectives on Work Experience and Life Experience in the Context of Mature Students in Higher Education	272
	<i>Lucy Ellis and Nazim Uddin</i>	
	<i>Index</i>	284

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figures

8.1 Comparison of continuation rates between mature and young students: All registered HE Providers vs Arts University Plymouth (Office for Students, 2022)	140
8.2 Analysis of survey responses (Arts University Plymouth, 2024)	142
8.3 Attainment indicator values by age: All registered English HE Providers vs Arts University Plymouth (Office for Students, 2023)	144
8.4 Progression indicator values by age: All registered English HE Providers compared with Arts University Plymouth (Office for Students, 2022)	145
13.1 LinkedIn profile sections	202
16.1 Interventions available throughout the student lifecycle at the University of East Anglia 2024	249
16.2 Number of students enrolled in partner colleges compared to number of students participating in Outreach activities, University of East Anglia	251

Tables

2.1 Some Organisations which Collate Higher Education Statistics and the Geographical Domains They Cover	22
3.1 Characteristics of the 219 Respondents	33
3.2 Definition and Institutional Engagement in Identifying and Widening Participation	35
3.3 Rankings of Common Purposes for Identifying Mature Students	36

3.4	Rankings of Activities to Engage in Widening Participation for HE Students	37
3.5	Views about Mission or Strategic Plan for WAMS	38
3.6	Rankings of Important Actors in Developing WAMS	39
3.7	Rankings of Goals for Developing, Managing and Implementing WAMS	39
3.8	Staffing for WAMS Initiatives	40
3.9	Means of Communication about WAMS Policies/Practices	41
3.10	Rankings of Evaluation Means of WAMS Initiatives	41
3.11	Experience with Mature Age Student Inclusion	42
3.12	Country Differences on Experience with Mature Age Students	42
3.13	Effectiveness of Measures of Support for Mature Age Students in HE Courses	43
3.14	Country Differences on the Provision of WAMS Support Services	44
6.1	Students' Enrolment by Gender for Four Previous Sessions (Academic Planning Unit, University of Jos)	99
15.1	Characteristics of Study Participants	227

FOREWORD

In 1962, I made the career leap of a lifetime. I had been born into a manual working-class family in Hackney, in the United Kingdom, then an inner-London borough characterised by moderate-to-severe poverty. By ‘poverty’ I do not just mean economic deprivation. I mean – primarily – poverty of aspiration. But this, the worst form of poverty, was certainly not true of my family or my secondary school. My school told me that I was ‘Oxbridge’ material. My family told me to ‘go for it’. In 1962, I was awarded an Exhibition to read Modern History at Lincoln College, Oxford, at which I remained to complete a doctorate.

So it was that the son of a warehouse packer embarked on an academic career. This would not have been possible without the proactive support of my teachers, both at school and university. I vowed – I became – a champion of Widening Access and Participation in higher education.

I now fast-forward to 2014. In that year I assumed that my academic career was reaching its end. I was wrong! A small private college in east London invited me to become its Principal. What intrigued me most about the establishment was that its students were all ‘mature’ adults, mainly in their 20s, 30s and 40s. The college – Nelson College London – now has an enrolment in excess of 1700 students. The recruitment and success profiles remain stubbornly impressive. The keys to this success are the subject of many of the essays now presented to the public in this book.

Widening Access for Mature Students presents unique challenges and calls for bold solutions. To begin with, few of these individuals meet what are known as ‘standard’ university entry requirements. They may in fact have no formal entry certification at all. That does not mean that they cannot successfully complete a Diploma or Degree programme.

Then they may well be in employment, or have immovable parental or caring responsibilities that clash with the attendance requirements of a higher education provider. The solution Nelson College adopted was to timetable lectures and workshops to make attendance possible, using all the facilities the internet now offers. It's worth adding that in this respect the 'lockdown' required during the Covid emergency actually proved a blessing in disguise. And it's worth stressing the wider lesson that higher education institutions must make it a priority to devote sufficient resources to facilitate understanding the relationship between these facilities and the higher education journey. Teaching materials – and the process we call 'teaching' in higher education – will certainly need to be thoroughly revised as a result.

But the challenging essays in this book venture well beyond the confines of Nelson College. Higher education is a complex pedagogic process, not simply a straightforward quantifiable outcome. Accordingly, the essays examine international trends, approaches and frameworks, acknowledging that working age adults need to participate in higher education across lengthening working lives. How can these needs be successfully met? And what will be the respective contributions of students, teachers, institutions *and employers* in meeting them?

This book sets out to answer these questions. The authors are all seasoned, expert practitioners. Their contributions have been skilfully collated and co-ordinated by Professor David Baker (Director of David Baker Consulting, formerly Principal and Chief Executive of Plymouth Marjon University, and former Deputy Chair of the UK's Joint Information Systems Committee), Dr Lucy Ellis (of David Baker Consulting & the University of Exeter) and Nazim Uddin (Director, Co-Founder and Head of Quality at Nelson College London).

I am delighted and honoured to endorse and commend this volume.

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We would also like to thank Sarah Hyde for her support in establishing the book proposal; Jayati Tripathi our Editorial Assistant for her help in the preparation and production of the book; Francis Vaughan who provided the index and the list of abbreviations, Lucy Rainer who provided invaluable copy editing and Laura Wilson who organized the time zones and logistics to enable experts around the world to enter into the benchmarking exercise.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Acronym	Meaning
<i>AALL Inc</i>	Association for Academic Language and Learning
<i>AAU</i>	Association of African Universities
<i>ABS</i>	Australian Bureau of Statistics
<i>ACIOE</i>	Accountability Competence Innovation Optimism Excellence
<i>ACM</i>	Academy of Contemporary Music
<i>ACODE</i>	Australasian Council on Open Distance and E-Learning
<i>AHEP</i>	Association of Higher Education Professionals
<i>AHUA</i>	Association of Heads of University Administration
<i>AIHW</i>	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
<i>ALDINHE</i>	Association for Learning Development in Higher Education
<i>AMOSHE</i>	Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education
<i>ANUIES</i>	National Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutions
<i>APEL</i>	Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning
<i>APP</i>	Access and Participation Plan
<i>AR</i>	Action Research
<i>ArtsEd</i>	Arts Educational School
<i>ASUU</i>	Academic Staff Union of Universities
<i>AUCC</i>	Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada
<i>AUP</i>	Arts University Plymouth
<i>BA</i>	Bachelor of Arts
<i>BCU</i>	Royal Birmingham Conservatoire
<i>BERA</i>	British Educational Research Association
<i>BIMM</i>	Brighton Institute of Modern Music

xx Abbreviations

<i>CAEL</i>	Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning
<i>CBI</i>	Could Be Improved
<i>CECA</i>	International Committee of Museum Educators
<i>CECOMPS</i>	University of Jos Centre for Conflict Management and Peace Studies
<i>CENEVAL</i>	The National Centre for Higher Education Assessment
<i>CGWS</i>	University Centre for Gender and Women Studies
<i>CLL</i>	Centre for Lifelong Learning
<i>COBE</i>	Coordination of Student Orientation and Well Being
<i>COI</i>	Community of Inquiry
<i>COR</i>	Conservation of Resources Theory
<i>COVID-19</i>	Coronavirus Disease 2019
<i>CTER</i>	Commission for Tertiary Education and Research
<i>CUC</i>	Committee of University Chairs
<i>CUMEX</i>	Consortio de Universidades Mexicanas
<i>CUP</i>	Certificate in University Preparation
<i>CV</i>	Curriculum Vitae
<i>DfE</i>	Department for Education
<i>DIUS</i>	Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills
<i>DOI</i>	Digital Object Identifier
<i>EORR</i>	Equality of Risk Register
<i>ESOL</i>	English for Speakers of Other Languages
<i>FACE</i>	Forum for Access and Continuing Education
<i>FE</i>	Further Education
<i>FEC</i>	Further Education College
<i>FSB</i>	Federal Scholarship Board
<i>G20</i>	The Group of Twenty
<i>GCSE</i>	General Certificate of Secondary Education
<i>GDP</i>	Gross Domestic Product
<i>HDR</i>	Higher Degree by Research
<i>HE</i>	Higher Education
<i>HEFCE</i>	Higher Education Funding Council for England
<i>HEI</i>	Higher Education Institution
<i>HEPI</i>	Higher Education Policy Institute
<i>HESA</i>	Higher Education Statistics Agency
<i>HESF</i>	Higher Education Success Factor Model
<i>HND</i>	Higher National Diploma
<i>IAG</i>	Information Advice and Guidance
<i>ICMP</i>	Institute of Contemporary Music Performance
<i>ILO</i>	International Labour Organisation
<i>IMD</i>	Index of Multiple Deprivation
<i>I–R–E</i>	Initiation, Response, Evaluation
<i>ISBN</i>	International Standard Book Number

<i>ISSP</i>	Indigenous Student Success Programmes
<i>ISWAP</i>	Islamic State West Africa Province
<i>IT</i>	Information Technology
<i>JAMB</i>	Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board
<i>KEC</i>	Knowledge Exchange Centre
<i>KS5</i>	Key Stage 5
<i>LAMDA</i>	London Academy of Music & Dramatic Art
<i>LIPA</i>	Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts
<i>LLE</i>	Lifelong Learning Entitlement
<i>LMS</i>	Learning Management System
<i>LMX</i>	Leader Member eXchange Model
<i>MM</i>	Migrant Mothers
<i>MSc</i>	Master of Science
<i>MSM</i>	Migrant Student Mothers
<i>NA</i>	Not Available
<i>NAAT</i>	National Association of Academic Technologists
<i>NADEOSA</i>	National Association of Distance Education and Open Learning in South Africa
<i>NASU</i>	Non-Academic Staff Union of Universities
<i>NATSIHEC</i>	National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Consortium
<i>NBS</i>	National Bureau of Statistics
<i>NCL</i>	Nelson College London
<i>NCSEHE</i>	National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education
<i>NEDIAL</i>	Network for EDI Academic Leads
<i>NELFUND</i>	The Nigeran Education Loan Fund
<i>NERUPI</i>	Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions
<i>NGO</i>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<i>NQF</i>	National Qualifications Framework
<i>NSS</i>	UK National Student Survey
<i>NUC</i>	National Universities Commission
<i>NUS</i>	National Union of Students
<i>NVE</i>	Not Very Effective
<i>NVivo</i>	Non-Versioned Information, Versatile Outcomes
<i>NYSC</i>	National Youth Service Corp
<i>ODLAA</i>	Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia
<i>OECD</i>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<i>OfS</i>	Office for Students
<i>ONS</i>	Office for National Statistics
<i>PAIS</i>	Politics and International Studies
<i>PAL</i>	Peer Assisted Learning
<i>PALS</i>	The Pathways and Academic Learning Support Centre

<i>PhD</i>	Doctor of Philosophy
<i>PIT</i>	Institutional Tutoring Program
<i>PITTA</i>	Integral Tutoring and Academic Pathway Programme
<i>PLS-SEM</i>	Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling
<i>POLAR</i>	Participation of Local Areas
<i>QR</i>	Quick-Response Code
<i>QUT</i>	Queensland University of Technology
<i>RADA</i>	Royal Academy of Dramatic Art
<i>REF</i>	Research Excellence Framework
<i>RPL</i>	Recognition of Prior Learning
<i>SAE</i>	School of Audio Engineering
<i>SAIDE</i>	South African Institute for Distance Education
<i>SE</i>	Some Aspects Effective
<i>SES</i>	Socioeconomic Status
<i>SHED</i>	Sustainability in Higher Education Developers
<i>SP</i>	Student Parents
<i>SRHE</i>	Society for Research into Higher Education
<i>SSANU</i>	Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities
<i>STEM</i>	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
<i>TAFE</i>	Technical and Further Education
<i>TASO</i>	Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education
<i>TCSI</i>	Tertiary Collection of Student Information
<i>TEF</i>	Teaching Excellence Framework
<i>TEL</i>	Technology Enhanced Learning
<i>TEQSA</i>	Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency
<i>TUNDRA</i>	Tracking Under-Representation by Area
<i>UACH</i>	Autonomous University of Chihuahua
<i>UAE</i>	United Arab Emirates
<i>UALL</i>	Universities Association of Lifelong Learning
<i>UCAS</i>	Universities and Colleges Admission Service
<i>UEA</i>	University of East Anglia
<i>UK</i>	United Kingdom
<i>UN</i>	United Nations
<i>UNAM</i>	National Autonomous University of Mexico
<i>UNESCO</i>	The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
<i>US/USA</i>	United States of America
<i>VE</i>	Very Effective
<i>VET</i>	Vocational Education and Training
<i>VLE</i>	Virtual Learning Environment
<i>WAMS</i>	Widening Access for Mature Students
<i>WP</i>	Widening Participation
<i>WPLL</i>	Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning Journal

PREFACE

Introduction to Exploring Widening Access for Mature Age Students: International Data, Experiences and Practices

Kensa Broadhurst

How do, and should, universities and other higher-level institutions support students who have not moved with their educational cohort into full-time tertiary education? How global is the phenomenon of so-called mature students? What characteristics do such students share? How do their needs differ from the traditional perception of undergraduate students? How do these norms vary globally? What data is available to inform researchers looking to examine these issues and how they affect higher education institutions worldwide? What can institutions learn from others which have introduced policies regarding widening participation to support the so-called non-traditional students?

What is the normal age to start an undergraduate degree or diploma? For growing numbers of people, this is not immediately after the end of compulsory education. Factors such as family and financial circumstances, differing cultural norms including compulsory military service or historic community perceptions, and perceived educational failure have meant that many people do not progress to university or higher education immediately after finishing their secondary, or compulsory, education. Alongside this, recent changes in employment practices have shown that there is a need for working age adults to remain employable by upskilling or even changing career. The extension in the length of working lives, changing requirements in occupational competence, and specific working practices have all added to the concept of lifelong education. Working practices and roles are constantly changing with the development of new technologies. These reasons have resulted in increasing numbers of people beginning university or tertiary-level courses at a later stage in their lives. We are now witnessing an ongoing and pressing need for working age adults engaged in all kinds and classifications of work to participate in further and higher education. This is the case for countries with developed and developing economies.

Therefore, to complement the growth in widening participation and older-age students entering tertiary education we are already witnessing, institutions need to consider what policies and practices will encourage working age adults to participate in education for professional development purposes and those mechanisms by which they can be supported and guided to make informed choices about the selection and successful completion of programmes. Ultimately, it is they who will decide whether they will engage in tertiary education, how they will do that, and when and where. This decision may come at some financial cost, not only in terms of course fees, but also in potential loss of earnings. Any choice of institution may be limited by family circumstances. Therefore, tertiary education systems and those who administer and teach in them need to consider how they can broaden access to education to more fully include these adults and assist them to be successful in those programmes and complete degree and diploma programmes. These adults accessing tertiary education at a later stage than their secondary education peers have come to be referred to as WAMS (Widening Access for Mature Students). In addition, there is broader consideration at individual institution level as to whether they may need to alter programme provision to include full-time, campus-based provisions for school leavers as well as those that accommodate working age adults on a part-time, flexible, hybrid basis.

There may be unnecessary and unhelpful barriers that limit the accessibility of education programmes to these adults. These students may lack the readiness to participate effectively in those programs, and these provisions may not always be organised and enacted in ways which are commensurate with the needs of adults who have family, work, and community commitments on top of those associated with studying. Consequently, there is a need to understand how best to inform and engage mature age adults about continuing education programmes, the entry requirements, and means of participating in them.

After an introduction to the findings of this book in Sections I and II examines the variations in the international availability of definitions of mature students and widening access, and statistics regarding entrance to tertiary education. The increasingly significant presence of older students, often with non-standard entry requirements, is evident in tertiary education systems in many countries but the availability of statistics regarding this is subject to wide variation. The focus then turns to two pieces of work commissioned alongside the development of this book: a survey of practices for supporting participation of mature age students in Australian and United Kingdom tertiary education and the report of a benchmarking exercise. An anonymous survey was carried out between June 2023 and January 2024 titled *Widening Access Mature Students in Education*. Two data collection hubs in the United Kingdom and Australia gathered data from educators in these respective countries and the chapter presented here discusses the administration and results of

this survey. A benchmarking exercise was undertaken by a group of international partner institutions from Mexico, Nigeria, Australia, and the United Kingdom. The exercise aimed, in part, to identify what are acceptable practices and outcomes for supporting mature age students, and to what extent and in what ways are institutions or individuals meeting those standards. The benchmarking participants were asked to consider the broad themes that the Survey above was designed to capture, namely, regarding i) informing, ii) engaging and iii) supporting mature age students.

Section III focusses on the engagement and participation of mature students in tertiary education. Alongside contributions from academics based in the United Kingdom regarding the coping mechanisms and how the life experiences and situations of mature students affect their approaches to higher education, this section includes examining the experiences of student mothers, as well as offering international perspectives from Nigeria and Australia, including the issues regarding widening access for indigenous mature age students.

Section IV gives examples of curriculum and cultural practices and offers examples from several institutions both in the United Kingdom and Mexico, which focus on supporting mature students including the use of social media to help students bridge the gap between work and study, and how tutoring systems can be adapted to support students. The section concludes with a literature review regarding the value of work experience in educational settings.



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SECTION I

Findings



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1

SUMMARY AND SYNTHESIS OF OUTCOMES AND FINDINGS

David Baker, Lucy Ellis and Nazim Uddin

Introduction

This chapter introduces the main concepts and summarises the key themes considered in the book. It looks in particular at definitions of widening access and mature students (combined as widening access for mature students, or WAMS for short) and the drivers behind the provision of education to WAMS. It summarises the available data, as discussed in later chapters, and demographic differences around the world and their impact on the provision of higher education (HE) to groups such as WAMS, as well as some basic characteristics typically associated with mature students. It provides an overview of the many strategies and policies articulated in the book, identifying the barriers to successful entry into HE by WAMS, including the lack of differentiation in some cases between 18-year-olds and mature (part time in particular) students, as well as the achievements of institutions in encouraging and supporting such students throughout their journey through university. It then reviews the way in which higher education institutions (HEIs) are, and could be, successful in terms of WAMS recruitment, retention, wellbeing, and success across a range of contexts and challenges, looking in particular at digital and related solutions, work-based learning, and student empowerment.

Definitions and Drivers

There is no single definition of a mature student because there is no one type. Mature students will normally be over the age of 21 (older in some countries) when they start their course and are more likely to: be disabled; have non-traditional qualifications (if any); come from lower socio-economic

backgrounds; have family or caring responsibilities and commitments; be the first from their family or immediate social group to go to university or college; have experienced previous 'educative trauma'; be from black or minority ethnic groups or indigenous peoples; experience ageism, especially in subject areas and professions such as the performing arts, where the young are traditionally favoured; come from cultures that do not encourage mature (and especially female) students into education, as for example in Nigeria; have had a break in education before returning to study; have been displaced at some point in their lives; not be 'well-off' in financial terms; have other characteristics which mean they do not fit the 'normal' pattern of student behaviour, where tertiary education is coterminous with secondary, and age of entry is 18 years. Because of this diversity, the institutions in which mature students are located may not sufficiently recognise their specific needs, putting them at a disadvantage in their education experiences, including before they (re-) enter HE, and sometimes as a result of their self-perception, feelings of self-worth, lack of confidence, and record of previous (perceived) failure.

Over the last 30 years or so, HE has changed from an elite to a mass system in many parts of the world, becoming a significant agent of change in the process. In advanced economies, the need for an ever more skilled workforce, coupled with ageing populations, has demanded that a greater proportion of a country's population gain higher level qualifications. This massification of the HE sector has been accompanied by its marketisation, commercialisation, and, indeed, politicisation. Recruiting and retaining a greater number of students from a broader, more diverse range of backgrounds has become ever more important in an age of significantly increased competition, nationally and internationally. More inclusive approaches have brought an increased focus on 'disadvantaged' students from low socio-economic backgrounds. For the purposes of this book, widening access, otherwise known as widening participation, is the process by which HEIs facilitate admission to students from underrepresented groups (sometimes defined and categorised by governments), such as mature students, the aim being to increase social mobility, economic development, and personal empowerment. In general, WAMS are underrepresented in HE, despite many countries' initiatives over the years, and are almost certain to have more special requirements than 18-year-olds (and possibly even mature students) undertaking study full time.

Statistics and Data Characteristics

Statistics relating to WAMS are variable, with more data being collected in the Global North than elsewhere, while the overarching demographics of a country may affect attitudes, approaches, provision, and a whole host of other variables, as for example in a 'young' country like South Africa as opposed to one with an ageing population such as the UK. Some patterns can nevertheless be

detected. In particular, WAMS are far more likely to be studying part time, and their numbers in many countries are growing, especially after a dip during the COVID-19 pandemic and on courses (such as Business and Management) with strong links to employment and sustainable professional development through continuing education and training; all are elements in a lifelong learning journey for WAMS in particular and workers in general. Mature students are still nevertheless a minority group within most HEIs, and, given the challenges which they face, their continuation, completion, and attainment rates are typically below those of full-time, traditional entry students, often as a result of mental health and wellbeing issues, and notwithstanding the valuable life experiences and practical skills they often bring to academic environments.

Strategies and Policies for WAMS

Many countries (and not just in the Global North) have developed, or are developing, strategies and policies aimed at encouraging more people to enter HE in order to diversify student populations to ensure equity and equality of opportunity, maximise skills bases to match future employer requirements, and to help as many as possible realise their full educational, professional, and career potential. Indeed, in some countries, such as the UK, HEIs are required to set out access and participation plans for increasing the take-up of university places by groups who were previously, or are currently, underrepresented. This requirement extends to the provision of information, advice, and guidance (IAG), along with support, insight, and apposite teaching and learning frameworks across the student lifecycle.

Yet, notwithstanding the fact that WAMS are a key target group in this context, it is evident from many of the studies in this book that there are still barriers (actual and perceived) relating not only to their entry into HE but also to their successful completion of the courses selected. Institutional (and individual teacher) attitudes to WAMS and organisational readiness to accommodate them and their specific needs are potential issues. Inability to catch up, and keep up, in terms of digital literacy may have a significant effect on mature students. Difference from the 'norm', feelings of isolation and loneliness, and lack of preparedness for HE may prevent effective engagement by WAMS. There are many more, potentially, as enumerated later in this book.

The lack of coherent strategies and approaches by many HEIs internationally is perhaps best symbolised by the many different descriptors used in relation to WAMS. Such students are often seen (including by teaching staff as well as institutionally) as problematic or 'in deficit' because of not having moved directly from school (and therefore being less well prepared for university-level study), though this book shows the increasing awareness, in many countries, and especially the Global North, of WAMS' concerns and requirements, and the need to respond to them effectively, not least because of the

imperative for continuing sustained, and sustainable workforce upskilling in all economies, and not just more advanced ones.

WAMS Requirements and Institutional Responses

WAMS will require tailored guidance, support, preparation, and educational pathways as part of any strategy for effective engagement in HE in general and to ensure that they are fully ready to benefit from the education experience in particular. As 'mature' students, they will need to understand and appreciate the advantages HE should bring, balanced out against not only the many commitments that WAMS will have to make to achieve a degree-level education but also the other activities which they will inevitably be undertaking as part of their obligations to their family and their employer. Time will be an especially precious commodity for WAMS; effort spent studying is effort not spent on looking after family, or carrying out tasks associated with paid employment, for example. HE has to be made doubly worthwhile and feasible for a mature student, who will typically be less willing to embrace the risks associated with participation in HE; increasing WAMS' confidence should be a significant aim and benefit for such students.

How this is all achieved varies both within and between countries, as for example Australia and the UK, and will be challenging because of the fast pace of change in not only in working environments but also across industries, economies, and societies, nationally and internationally. It also depends on institutional views of WAMS. As mature students with life and work experience, there is often an assumption that they will be able to handle HE without any special preparation, training, or support. But several chapters in this book show that this is often not the case, given that, almost by definition, WAMS have no prior experience of advanced study and may well lack the necessary study skills to succeed as independent, and interdependent, learners, especially in relation to their ability to make informed choices and to engage successfully in them.

Having said that, research reported later in this book shows that many HEIs not only identify WAMS separately but also provide and promote specific initiatives for them, though there may not always be a separate strategy or resourcing for the group. While the relative importance of such provision (and its purpose) varies from institution to institution, there is a good degree of commonality, as for example between Australia and the UK. It would seem that variations tend to be driven by institutional priorities, as led by government imperatives and targets such as student recruitment and retention.

Surprisingly, in universities (as opposed to vocational education institutions), employability is often not a top priority in this regard despite its considerable importance for individuals, organisations, and governments. More importantly, the extent to which WAMS are proactively accommodated

within HEIs differs widely, with a need for universities still to find ways of encouraging and supporting these students, not least in terms of their likely learning preferences. These may well differ from those of 18-year-olds to the point where they need to be recognised and treated as a heterogeneous group of flexible, autonomous, individualised learners rather than a coherent subset of a university's student population because of the many differing demands placed on them, as evinced by the experience of providing for WAMS at Nelson College London: neither HE, nor the transition to HE, is a one-size-fits-all experience.

Towards Success

Recruiting WAMS is only the beginning, and later chapters show that the effort expended in attracting such students into HE is not always as evident as it should be when it comes to supporting them through their educational journey to a successful conclusion. This was evident in the benchmarking exercise that underpins this book, though it is encouraging to see the widespread willingness to effect change in the way in which WAMS are treated, with an extensive and imaginative list of possible potential interventions being identified for further consideration. One such is the use of peer tutors – mature students from similar backgrounds and experiences of HE who provide academic support to their classmates as a valuable tool in supporting WAMS on their journey through university. Another is an increasing focus in some institutions on work-based learning, taking the education to the student in their place of employment. It is certainly clear that there is an appetite among mature students for learning about the range of coping resources (including digital ones) and support provision available to them. But institutions must respond to this by empowering WAMS to take ownership of their education through the creation of an inclusive and equitable learning environment that values diversity, promotes collaboration, and encourages active engagement. This will enable students to construct knowledge actively and develop critical skills as necessary.

In this context, the Open Foundation programme at the University of Newcastle, Australia, begun in 1974, provides a valuable case study, especially in terms of the pathways that enable both access to HE and preparation for it, contributing not only to the high rate of WAMS enrolments but also to their degree successes. In particular, online provision and access have been a significant positive contributory factor in opening up opportunities for disadvantaged students, an important consideration in relation to WAMS. The ubiquity of social media (SM) and the widespread engagement of mature and disadvantaged students with SM offer significant opportunities for HEIs, including with regard to supporting WAMS to realise the full networking benefits of, for example, a platform such as LinkedIn as a way of building their educational, professional, and career profiles, both during and after university.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is another significant tool whose potential for WAMS has yet to be fully recognised or exploited, though HEIs are working through AI's use, its dangers, and opportunities.

Digital provision and usage increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. HEIs 'pivoted' pedagogical practices in order to continue to provide for students' needs. This was not in itself a bad thing; quite the contrary, for it arguably offered more opportunities for WAMS to engage with HE, though there were more possibilities for effective solutions in the Global North than elsewhere. However, the move online proved problematic for mature and disadvantaged students, not least in terms of the lack of emotional and social connections so important to WAMS, who may already have feelings of isolation and loneliness. Peer relationships, providing support and social as well as educational interaction, have proved valuable in such circumstances, especially in terms of creating identity within the new environment. The experience of delivering courses during COVID-19 has been an invaluable experience for HEIs as they 'pivot' back to a different kind of provision and support that typically maintains both physical and digital presences in more hybrid and blended models than previously.

Conclusion

The support WAMS receive from their chosen HEI will be critical to success or failure, both for the individual and the institution. The Australian Higher Education Success Factor (HESF) model offers a framework within which to assess how WAMS are affected and influenced in terms of HE participation, retention, and success rates. Social environment, physical environment, economic conditions, health and wellbeing, and individual characteristics all need to be considered, and while the relative importance of each factor will vary, all factors will have a motivational impact on the student. Institutional and country responses to these factors will need to look at systemic actions that include such things as support for career interruptions, enhanced enrolment flexibility, improvements in university administration, and increased financial support.

The chapters in this collaborative book represent an international perspective on this important topic, with a core of authors having taken part in an earlier benchmarking exercise as reported in Chapter 4. It is clear that there is much further collaborative research to undertake including a bigger, bolder, and more representative benchmarking exercise to probe deeper into the topic and to illuminate new concepts in the field. Data collection must continue in a coordinated fashion in order to generate reliable datasets in standardised formats to enable the identification of trends and patterns for strategic planning and information for educationalists, economists, and employment experts. The topic of mature students in a widening access context deserves this rigorous attention as a crucial population which will undoubtedly shape the future of the education landscape worldwide.

SECTION II

International Data and Benchmarking



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2

INTERNATIONAL DATA ON MATURE AGE STUDENTS

Availability and Content

Kensa Broadhurst and Lucy Ellis

Introduction

How do we define who is regarded as a mature student, the concept of widening access in higher education (hereafter HE), and how do these definitions differ around the world? Alongside some answers to these questions, this chapter offers a commentary on the availability and content of statistics (official and quasi-official) regarding the characteristics of national student populations, including how widely these are available, and the geographical bias encountered when researching these statistics. This is followed by a review of research into examples of good practice and successful interventions carried out to widen access to HE for mature students and improve their experience at HE institutions.

Definitions of the Term Mature Students

Remarkably few HE systems worldwide appear to define mature students and those that do are predominantly based in the global north. This raises questions regarding what is considered ‘the norm’ with regard to age of entry to university. Is entry immediately after secondary education predominantly a phenomenon of the global north? Beginning with England, UK and moving outwards geographically, the Office for Students (hereafter OfS), the HE regulator for England, describes a mature student as being one who is over 21 years of age when they begin their course (Office for Students 2021, p. 1). More widely within the UK, the House of Commons, the elected chamber of government, has no official definition for a mature student but acknowledges that they are usually over 21 years of age (Hubble and Bolton 2021, p. 3). It should

be noted that the OfS reports statistics to the House of Commons. The OfS (2021, p. 2) notes that mature students are most likely to: be disabled; have non-traditional qualifications; come from lower socio-economic backgrounds; have family or caring responsibilities; and be from black or minority ethnic groups. Mature students

can also belong to any or all of the [...] groups, and this could be deemed a double disadvantage: coming from a social group that is underrepresented in HE and having had a break in education before returning to learn.

(Burnell 2015, p. 7)

Mature students are underrepresented in HE because they are not a homogeneous ‘cohort’ and will have more needs than 18-year-olds who progress immediately into HE from school or college. Twigg-Flesner (2019, p. 132, in Blessinger, Hoffmann and Makhanya) when discussing mature students in England reflects that ‘the diverse nature of the group referred to as “mature students” must be recognised, and HEIs must recognize the differences in perspectives and commitments between 21 years old with limited long-term commitments compared to maybe the “older” mature students.’ For Gorard et al. (2019, p. 112),

[f]irst degree mature students are often, perhaps unintentionally, ignored in policy pronouncements and even research about widening participation to HE, which tends to focus on existing traditional age full-time participations to the exclusion of all other relevant parties and comparators.

The Bridge Group notes that the POLAR measure [Participation of Local Areas, used for collecting statistics regarding characteristics of the UK population] for judging participation in HE in the UK is not suitable for supplying data regarding mature students (The Bridge Group 2018, p. 6).

Gregersen and Nielsen (2023, p. 82) note that in Denmark there are no official indicators or definitions of mature students. However, because student age at admission is registered and this information is placed into broad age bands, data regarding the number of students over the age of 25 can be collected. For Gregersen and Nielsen (p. 90), definitions of a mature student should consider more than just age, they also need to consider family commitments, employment status, past education, and other ways through which an individual clashes with those ‘norms’ associated with being a student, namely that they have no other commitments on their time and finances and have moved seamlessly through their educational journey.

Stone and O’Shea (2019a, p. 58) chose to define mature students in Australia as being over 25, in line with the use of this age category by the Australian Bureau of Statistics to define ‘older learners and employees.’ Bennett (2018, p. 526)

includes mature students in Australia as part of a wider group ‘experiencing disadvantage in the higher education system.’ Kahu et al. (2014, p. 484) define mature students in Aotearoa New Zealand as being over 24 and note that this cohort makes up approximately one-sixth of all Bachelors’ degree students.

Fambely (2020), in discussing the situation in Canada, reminds us that ‘[a]dult students often have different motivations and goals, and may encounter barriers not experienced by most traditional students’ (p. 2). These barriers arise because mature students ‘often have multiple roles such as parent, spouse, and possibly employee’ (p. 2). For Fambely, the term “[m]ature female” student refers to a woman, returning to post-secondary education, at least 23 years of age, married or cohabiting at the same address as her husband or partner, and with at least one child’ (p. 2), therefore, once more, status as a mature student is considered as being not solely dependent on age. Gorard et al. (2019, p. 102), in their list of ‘indicators of personal and socioeconomic disadvantage,’ list both individual characteristics, including being a mature student, and individual experiences, including those who have had a ‘non-traditional qualification route to HE.’

Burnell reflects on the attitudes of mature students to their education history, that ‘the participants had gained a sense of feeling “normal after all”, despite their mainstream schooling leaving them with feelings of having failed’ (2015, p. 7). This concept that prior failure is a characteristic of mature students cannot be ignored, whether it is true at an individual level or can be regarded as a characteristic of subsets of the overall group. This consideration, that mature students have in some way failed during their secondary education, alongside the further characteristics which many mature students share, namely statuses related to their family commitments, employment, non-traditional qualifications, and other factors of deprivation, appears to be far more important than physical age when discussing extra support which would benefit these students.

Definitions of Widening Access

Widening access, or widening participation, is the process by which HE institutions (HEIs) seek to make admission attainable by those potential students from population sectors affected by a measure of disadvantage. For Lambert (2019, p. 161), ‘widening participation policies in higher education seek to improve the access and success of underrepresented students, from various government defined equity groups.’ Burnell (2015, p. 6) notes ‘[t]he [UK] government and HE institutions have made concerted efforts, through changes to policy and practice, to enable non-traditional learners to participate in HE, to be known as widening participation.’ However, Tett (2004, p. 253) notes that in the UK, raising the aspirations of the working class with regard to HE, rather than changing educational culture, seems to be the norm. She also observes

that university services are based on the idea that students attend full-time and live on or near the campus (p. 259) which, as we have seen above in noting the factors which can also affect mature students, is problematic in terms of equal access. Rainford (2023, p. 411) describes widening access to HE as a ‘global issue,’ one which has led to the priorities in England being ‘raising attainment and raising participation.’ In the United States, nearly all community colleges have no application criteria (Petersen and Gruberg, in Blessinger et al. 2019, p. 18); thus, offering the potential for access to all who wish to participate in HE. ‘[T]he post 9/11 GI Bill provides the opportunity for veterans to attend college by covering tuition fees’ (Ward 2019, p. 52). In a similar situation in Aotearoa New Zealand,

[t]he Education Amendment Act (1990) grants university admission to New Zealand citizens and permanent residents aged 20 and over, regardless of prior qualifications. Adults are entitled to enrol in most undergraduate programmes, except those with specific entry requirements (for example, teaching).

(Bowl and Whitelaw 2010, p. 16)

In Australia, ‘enabling programs’ provide an Open Access course of 6–12 months for those who need to gain the necessary qualifications for university entry, including mature students (Bennett and Lumb 2019, p. 971).

A Survey of Available Statistics Regarding Mature Students

This section considers the availability of official statistics regarding mature students and sources of both official and quasi-official statistics which are publicly available.

Again, the availability of university entry statistics which cover the specific admission of mature students does appear to be greater in the global north, especially as statistics can be extrapolated from data covering several countries, such as that collected by organisations like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (hereafter OECD) which offers information in a number of fields for its 38 member countries and other comparable nations including members of the G20. If we examine the available information for the UK, according to the House of Commons, in the academic year 2019/2020, 37% of undergraduate entrants in the UK were mature students (Hubble and Bolton 2021 p. 3). Mature students are more likely to study part-time, with 28% taking this route, compared with 3% of younger undergraduates. Further figures (Bolton 2024, p. 12) show an 89% growth in the number of students aged over 21 accepted through UCAS [Universities and Colleges Admission Service] for undergraduate degrees between 1994 and 2023. In the period 2010–2023, this was 11%. This growth rate broadly matches that for applicants aged under 21.

This figure suggests there was natural growth in all entries to HE irrespective of widening access policies. Hubble and Bolton (2021, pp. 3–4) also offer statistics regarding the ethnicity and gender of mature students as well as those self-declaring a disability which is useful for those looking to examine multiple factors of disadvantage. OfS figures for the academic year 2021/2022 show that 28.5% of entrants to full-time and 88% of entrants to part-time undergraduate degrees were aged over 21. Mature students can figure more prominently in courses which relate to upskilling for employment. In the Business and Management sector, 49.9% of students were over 21 (2023a, p. 4). However, '[c]ontinuation rates for 2020–2021 entrants aged 21 and over were 9.0 percentage points lower than for students aged under 21, compared with 7.1 percentage points for the previous year of entrants' (2023b, p. 5). Continuation rates refer to the number of students who continue into the next year of study. This disparity was also seen in rates of completion (i.e., finishing the course) and attainment (the highest level of education an individual achieves).

Further Education (hereafter FE) colleges in the UK provide pre-degree and vocational education (including to degree level). According to Colleges Scotland, 43% of their students were over 25 in the 2021/2022 academic year (Colleges Scotland 2023, p. 6) and 30% of all learning hours were delivered to this age group (p. 8). There is no information given regarding what courses these students were enrolled on, but 92,093 students were studying as part of their job (p. 25). This raises the growing issue of lifelong learning, coupled with retraining as people change careers, leading to more people studying at a later stage in their lives. The Association of Colleges, which covers further and tertiary colleges in England, carries out an annual enrolment survey. The survey taken in October 2023 highlights that 'adult enrolments are [...] on target or growing, perhaps reflecting a post-pandemic confidence to return to learning' (Association of Colleges 2023 p. 1). A total of 40% of colleges recruited their target figure of adult students, and 35% recruited more adults than they had expected (Association of Colleges 2023, p. 36). This trend appears to have been caused by a growth in ESOL [English for Speakers of Other Languages] registrations (Association of Colleges 2023, p. 37) caused by 'displacement, refugee status and asylum seeking' (Association of Colleges 2023, p. 39), including those from Ukraine.

According to Colleges Wales (2020, p. 3), the number of adults aged over 21 in FE in Wales, including in work-based education, during the academic year 2018/2019 was 91,505. This followed a broadly upward trend but predates the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the same document considers that significant numbers of people will be looking to update their skills following the pandemic, especially those who lost employment in the tourism and hospitality sectors and the role FE can play 'in delivering adult skills to support economic recovery in the post-virus period' (2022, p. 3). The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales does provide age statistics for students in HE in Wales but

does not break these down by level of degree. The inclusion of postgraduate students within many statistics often makes it difficult to identify statistics pertaining only to undergraduate entrants over a particular age. The Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland offers statistics on university entry. For the academic year 2021/2022, these show that 36.3% of all Northern Ireland domiciled first year HE students studying in UK HEIs were aged over 21; 6,965 out of a total of 19,180 (Department for the Economy 2023, Table 4). These students can be studying in Northern Ireland or elsewhere in the UK.

The 2021 census of education statistics for Hong Kong's population only gives percentages for the population aged over 15 who have attended post-secondary education; therefore, it is impossible to ascertain the ages of current students at the point of entry to HE (Census and Statistics Department Hong Kong Special Administration Region 2021a). However, data extrapolated from the University Grants Committee for the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, provided by those institutions who receive funding from this body, allows an examination of both full- and part-time student enrolment by age for the academic years 2018/2019 to 2022/2023 (University Grants Committee, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region). These figures show how many students of each age were in HE in Hong Kong, but do not link to the individual's year of study, qualification level, or age on first entry into HE, thus making analysis of mature students as per the definitions above difficult.

The most recent statistics from South Africa date from 2017. They note that '[t]he country is characterised by a young population with 32.3 million individuals being younger than 30 years in 2018' (Statistics South Africa 2019, p. ix). However, '[t]he percentage of first-time entering students as a ratio of total bachelor and diploma passes declined over the years, with less than half of those who achieved bachelor or diploma passes being enrolled as first-time students in 2016 (46,5%)' (Statistics South Africa 2019, p. ix). Interestingly, statistics giving the reasons why those aged 18–24 do not attend HE are collected (Statistics South Africa 2019, p. 27). These include: having completed the education level the individual wished to attain, having no money for course and other fees, family commitments, and prior poor academic performance. These are also broken down by province, population group, and gender. For example, they reveal that progression rates through secondary education for males are lower than for females (Statistics South Africa 2019, p. ix). There are some statistics for enrolments by age in Community Education Colleges (Statistics South Africa 2019, p. 50). These institutions are often attended by those who dropped out of school and need to gain their qualifications. In 2016, those aged 25–35 comprised the greatest number of enrolments (Statistics South Africa 2019, p. 50). With regard to population groups, the greatest rises in HE enrolments between 2000 and 2016 were to be seen

Among black African (106.9%), followed by coloureds (103.4%), and Indians/Asians (27.8%). During the same period there was a decrease of 6.2% in white enrolments. [...] In addition, 63.0% of enrolments in bachelor degrees (including all NQF levels 7 and equivalent) were females.

(*Statistics South Africa 2019*)

Turning to the Americas, statistical information in Spanish for Mexico can be found via the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía website. This includes information on the education of the population up to age 29. The most recently published figures from the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada appear to be those from 2011 (AUCC 2011). In 2010, 14% of all full-time undergraduate students and 60% of all part-time students were over the age of 25 (AUCC 2011, p. 7). Figures for the University of the West Indies are available through their annual student statistical digests. The Academic Portrait of students (2023a) offers statistics on the age of undergraduates at first entry for the years 2020–2022. The lowest age category is 24 and under, perhaps a reflection of what age students are regarded as mature at the university. They show that around 12% of entrants are aged over 24.

According to Universities Australia (2020 p. 31), in 2018, 37% of home (i.e., Australian) first-year undergraduates were aged over 21. No statistics by age are given for international students. Statistics for indigenous applicants show that '[i]n 2019, one-third of Indigenous applicants are aged 25 or older, compared to 21 per cent for non-Indigenous applicants' (Universities Australia 2020, p. 92). Interestingly, 'for the 40–64-year-old age group, Indigenous students are 3.8% of applications but represent 2.4 per cent of the whole population' (Universities Australia 2020, p. 93).

The Eurostudent website offers reports and statistics regarding a range of social and economic information about students entering HE in Europe. The collected statistics in Eurostudent VIII (2021–2024) include age at entry to HE; prior work experience; students with children; and access routes, all of which, as we have seen, can be relevant to mature students. The OECD offers an annual snapshot of education statistics as far as these are available for its 38 member countries and selected others such as any other G20 nations, and thus provides a useful source of comparative data (OECD 2023, p. 15). As to be expected from an organisation which grew out of the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation, the member states are principally developed nations, although several South American countries are seeking membership. 'Governments are increasingly looking to international comparisons of education opportunities and outcomes as they develop policies to enhance individuals' social and economic prospects, provide incentives for greater efficiency in schooling, and help to mobilise resources to meet rising demands' (OECD 2023, p. 3). The OECD summary, *Education at a Glance* (2023),

emphasises the importance of vocational education and training and notes the growing need for workers to update their skills throughout their careers (OECD 2023, p. 9). ‘In those countries that offer them, the average age of students in vocational programmes at post-secondary non-tertiary level is 30 years old, compared to 27 years at short-cycle tertiary level’ (OECD 2023, p. 146).

The OECD figures regarding populations which have achieved only secondary level education or have proceeded to tertiary level education mean it is possible to extrapolate the numbers of people who might benefit in the future from widening access to university programmes including through upskilling as part of their employment. ‘Adult learning is becoming a crucial tool for societies as they look to adapt to emerging challenges and benefit from new opportunities’ (OECD 2023, p. 127). The 2023 report comments that entry to HE varies, with students taking gap years or working before continuing with their studies. ‘Attractive employment opportunities and booming economies have prompted young people in some countries to defer education in favour of learning in the workplace, particularly when financial support for further study is limited’ (OECD 2023, p. 214). The average age of students at first entry to tertiary education by country is given (2023 p. 224). ‘Only 4% of first-time entrants in Belgium, and just 1% in Japan, are 25 or older. In contrast, more than 30% of first-time entrants in Colombia, Sweden, Switzerland and Türkiye are 25 years or older’ (OECD 2023, p. 219). The figures showing the average age of first-time tertiary graduates by country are available at OECD 2023, (p. 242). ‘In 2021, the average age of first time tertiary graduates was 26 across OECD countries. There is, however, notable variation between countries, ranging from 22 in Japan to 29 in Latvia’ (OECD 2023, p. 230). This perhaps goes some way to explaining why definitions of mature students are not found in many HE systems. Ages on entry vary considerably. For example, it is 24 in Israel, where military service is compulsory for most of the population, a consideration for other statistics from other countries too (OECD 2023, p. 223).

The statistics discussed above only represent a small proportion of HE establishments worldwide and lean heavily towards countries in the global north. Perhaps this reflects an unsurprising reality: the language of the internet, used to search for these statistics, is English. Those nations and institutions which use English in their online presence, a majority situated within the global north, were more easily obtained and understood. If the number of countries covered by the OECD statistics increases in the future, this could allow for a greater amount of information from other world regions. However, what did come across in these statistics, even those for countries firmly situated within the global north, were the variation in ease in finding figures which specifically related to mature students. This reveals a lot about how tertiary education is regarded globally and whether or not it is, in fact, the cultural norm for students to continue their education seamlessly from secondary education to HE. Where specific figures were available, they showed a difference in the age

at which an individual is regarded as being a mature entrant to HE, from 21 in the UK, to 24 in Aotearoa New Zealand and 25 in Australia. Far more consistent across those HE systems for which statistics are available is the concept of factors of deprivation causing a delay in individuals' progression from secondary education to HE.

Good Practice and Successful Interventions to Reach and Increase Numbers of Mature Students

What do HE providers do to ensure wider access for mature students and other groups who have been traditionally marginalised from HE? In the UK, all universities in receipt of public funds are required to produce policies and action plans regarding widening participation (Hubbard et al. 2021, p. 280).

For UK residents applying to HE, the clearest “non-traditional” route is that taken by mature students using prior experience as an alternative to KS5 [Key Stage 5, typically taken at the end of secondary education] or similar prior qualifications. First degree mature students are often, perhaps unintentionally, ignored in policy pronouncements and even research about widening participation to HE.

(Gorard et al. 2019, p.112)

The Arts University, Plymouth [see Chapter 8] is an example of a UK specialist university which explicitly states that it ‘welcomes applications from mature students’ in its Admissions Policy (Arts University Plymouth 2023, p. 5) as they believe ‘a mixture of backgrounds, ages and personalities enriches the student learning experience.’

Bowl and Whitelaw (2010) highlight the importance of access to HE courses in England and Aotearoa New Zealand. As mentioned above, all citizens over the age of 20, regardless of their qualifications, can apply for special admission to university. Most universities offer a Certificate in University Preparation (CUP) for which adults can enrol (p. 16). As the authors conclude, ‘open entry for adults over 20 means that preparatory study is a matter of persuasion rather than prescription. Potential applicants need to be convinced that investing time and money in a CUP course will be worthwhile’ (p. 17). The CUP offers ‘a quick upgrading of skills and knowledge’ (p. 17) and ‘a *package* of skills and subject knowledge’ (p. 18). However, ‘[t]he official discourse of English Access courses seems to assume adults wishing to progress educationally have deficits to be remedied by a standardised, accredited programme imparting a set of skills and attitudes that will lead to educational advancement’ (p. 19). This reinforces the idea that mature students have previously failed in their educational journey. This assumption is queried by Bowl and Whitelaw who point out ‘the view that adults are likely to have no

qualifications on entry to Access courses is frequently incorrect. [...] Access course achievement does not necessarily ensure educational advancement' (p. 19). They found that

A striking difference between preparatory provision in the two countries was how CUP course practitioners saw university acculturation as important, while in the English Access courses the off-campus focus and the diversity of university cultures made preparation for the reality of university problematic.

(p. 24)

Birmingham et al. (2023, p. 401) examined the effects of peer assisted learning (PAL) for 'mature students enrolled on a computer science programming module as part of an Access Foundation Programme at an Irish University.' This programme was aimed at increasing participation in tertiary education amongst underrepresented sections of the population. In this module,

Mature students reported difficulty [...] and attrition was higher than with other modules within the programme. The authors undertook a 3-year Action Research (AR) study to investigate what effect a structured PAL implementation would have on the perceived learning of mature students enrolled on this computer science programming module.

(Birmingham et al. 2023, p. 402)

The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- 1 What are the effects of structured PAL programmes on the perceived learning of Foundation Level mature students in computer programming?
- 2 Do structured PAL programmes promote a community of learning?
- 3 What are the characteristics of the PAL implementation that make it successful? (Birmingham et al. 2023, p. 403).

To be considered as eligible, students needed to be over 23 years of age. The programme was carried out in one-semester chunks across three consecutive academic years. The 'near-peer' (p. 402) course leaders were all undergraduate computer science students who had previously completed the same access course. Sessions were included as part of the timetable and course delivery (p. 403). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, weekly feedback sessions, and journals kept by participants (p. 404). The findings, as relating to the research questions at the heart of this study, include students perceiving their value in increasing understanding, comprehension, learning, and self-confidence (p. 405). This increase in confidence was also noted amongst those students who took part as peer mentors.

Findings from all AR cycles suggest that social interactions with peers of similar social and culture status were integral to the learning process [...] Participating in PAL offered students an opportunity to build mutually supportive networks that enhanced the social relationships and made their learning more enjoyable.

(p. 405)

The successful implementation of the programme was attributed to the chance for students to access the ‘safe-space environment’; the fact that sessions were integrated into the timetable and made mandatory meant they were valued by students. However, that they were offered on multiple occasions allowed for flexibility too (p. 406). In conclusion, ‘all three cycles suggest that PAL can have a positive effect on learner confidence, comprehension and foster a sense of belonging’ (p. 406).

Conclusion

As Davies (2013) states, for mature students: ‘[a]n unsuccessful employment/study balance and finding the time for study requirements is central to their participation in HE and successfully finding this balance places considerable stress upon the non-traditional student’ (p. 55). Non-traditional students place themselves outside HE and the presence of barriers to their participation in HE continues once they enrol in a course (p. 56). As we have seen many of these perceived barriers relate to the student’s family, economic, and geographical situation and these have to be factored into any attempts by the student to access and succeed in HE. That institutions are setting targets regarding access, student success, and progression can only be a good thing. Where a student is also in employment,

‘[t]hose employers who recognise the benefits of study-including the acquisition of work appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes-who are highly supportive and assist students to integrate study demands with work, leave little doubt in the mind of the employee that their employer considers the course of study valuable.’

(2013, p. 64)

Gregersen and Nielsen note that in Denmark additional funding is available to student parents (2023, p. 80).

The range in availability or otherwise of statistics regarding the admission of mature students to HE suggests that this could be an issue related to cultural norms across the world and access to HEIs, especially in the global south. Even within mass populations where tertiary education is often a rite of passage, such as in Europe, the statistics show there is a difference in the ages at which

individuals proceed. Rather than age, what appears to be a greater measure of concern is those other factors which can affect an individual's ability to access full-time education.

A primary aim of this chapter is to offer a non-exhaustive survey of the availability and content of statistics regarding the characteristics of national student populations. Table 2.1 presents a list of the organisations surveyed which collate HE statistics and the geographical domains they cover.

TABLE 2.1 Some Organisations which Collate Higher Education Statistics and the Geographical Domains They Cover

<i>Organisation</i>	<i>Country</i>
Association of Heads of University Administration (AHUA)	UK
Association of Higher Education Professionals (AHEP)	UK
Association of Colleges	England
Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDINHE)	UK
Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education (AMOSHE)	UK
Committee of University Chairs (CUC)	UK
Eurostudent	Europe
Guild HE	UK
Forum for Access and Continuing Education (FACE)	UK
NERUPI	UK & Europe
Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE)	UK
The Spinnaker Group	UK
Sustainability in Higher Education Developers (SHED)	Worldwide
UK Advising and Tutoring	UK
Universities Association of Lifelong Learning (UALL)	UK
The Bridge Group	UK
HELOA	UK
Network for EDI Academic Leads (NEDIAL)	UK
Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL Inc)	Australia
Australasian Council on Open, Distance, and E-Learning (ACODE)	Australia
Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia (ODLAA)	Australia
National Association of Distance Education and Open Learning in South Africa (NADEOSA)	South Africa
Stats SA: Statistics South Africa	South Africa
SAIDE (Enabling Successful Open Learning for All)	Sub-Saharan Africa
Association of African Private Universities	Africa
Association of African Universities (AAU)	Africa
Association of Commonwealth Universities	Worldwide
National Universities Commission	Nigeria

(Continued)

TABLE 2.1 (Continued)

<i>Organisation</i>	<i>Country</i>
European University Association	Europe
National Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutions (ANUIES)	Mexico
Consortio de Universidades Mexicanas (CUMEX)	Mexico
Association of Columbian Universities	Colombia
International Association of Universities	Worldwide
Association of Public & Land-grant Universities	Americas
Learning Specialists Association of Canada	Canada
Colleges & Institutes Canada	Canada
Census and Statistics Department Hong Kong Special Administration Region	Hong Kong

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3

WIDENING ACCESS MATURE STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

UK and Australia Survey

Stephen Billett and Anh Hai Le

Adults' Participation in Higher Education

Widening access has emerged as a key policy goal within higher education (HE) in many national contexts (Bathmaker 2016; Bowes et al. 2013; Burke 2020; Croxford et al. 2014). One of the driving forces of this goal has been a growing concern and need for working age adults to sustain their employability across lengthening working lives (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2006). A key imperative here is the need for working age adults to respond to constantly changing occupational and workplace requirements to secure and sustain their employability. These changes necessitate working age adults' participation in and engagement with HE provisions to develop the capacities and certification required for their employability. Hence, access to HE becomes pivotal to achieving these employability goals. However, many working age adults struggle to return to formalised study in HE. The challenges for these mature age students include awareness and understanding of the availability and suitability of educational pathways and options, their readiness to engage and be successful in those programmes and balancing study with other commitments. Thus, the solution to widening access for mature age students is more than increasing the supply of educational provisions. Instead, there is a need for HE institutions to provide specific kinds of guidance, support and education pathways for their successful engagement in HE, thus meeting both societal and personal goals. That is, those who administer and teach in those programmes to be aware of, accommodate and promote students' readiness to engage successfully in education and in ways distinct from what they encountered earlier in their schooling and post-school education. So, widening access is about: (i) engaging potential mature age

students to consider and be informed about HE provisions; (ii) making them ready to participate effectively in it; (iii) having provisions that are accessible for working age adults; (iv) providing the kinds of experiences that these adults need. That is, how these institutions need to be ready to address the needs of these learners and to assist not only their access to but success in HE.

This chapter reports and discusses survey data from university educators and administrators gathered in the UK and Australia relating to approaches and practices for the recruitment and engagement of mature age students and guiding and supporting them in their studies. These data include perspectives on what constitutes mature age students, and how their institutions have enacted policies and practices associated with encouraging and supporting the engagement of those students, as well as staffing qualities and culture, and provisions associated with guiding and supporting them in HE programmes and courses. The research found that many respondents view mature age students not in terms of age, but those who have not moved directly from school into HE, and in some ways as being in deficit. There were identified different emphases between respondents from the UK and Australian HE institutions about the goals for engaging these adults. There were reported differences in: (i) institutional or departmental mission, values and practices, and (ii) strategic planning and management objectives. In all, those individuals engaging directly with the students with the most influential and potentially able to enhance their participation (notably teachers and administrators) identified processes and responsibilities associated with achieving the intended goals of widening access. This was important, given the diverse demands and imperatives that educators confront with these students. Indeed, many of them viewed mature age students as being potentially problematic. This raises concerns about how these students' readiness would be accommodated and indicates potential difficulties with, and a lack of institutional readiness for, working with this older cohort of HE students. The case made here is that institutional readiness is likely to be a precursor to HE institutions' ability to realise the goals of widening access for mature age students that are now being posited as societal and personal imperatives.

Widening Access and Participation in HE

Concerns about widening mature age adults' access to HE are now being recognised and efforts are being made to translate them into practice in a number of countries. These issues are perhaps more to the fore in countries with advanced industrial economies whose populations are ageing. It also signals a shift in focus away from HE as the preserve of a smaller number of elite students to one more inclusive of a wider group of students and in greater numbers (Santiago et al. 2008), including mature age ones. In developed economies, such as the UK and Australia, changes in HE have been enacted to widen participation with an increased focus on disadvantaged students, including

those from low-socioeconomic status backgrounds (Moodie 2010; Osborne and Shuttleworth 2004; Robinson and Salvestrini 2020). This includes working age adults who are required to upgrade their qualifications and upskill themselves to maintain employability through formalised educational provisions (Billett et al. 2016). These adults are usually referred to as mature age students. But they have also been variously described as adult learners (Clegg et al. 2006), second chancers (Hayden and Long 2006), independent students (i.e., financially independent of their parents) and students returning to study (Chesters and Watson 2014). In other words, there is no single and consistent definition of these students.

Engaging Mature Age Students

The interest and trend in seeking to widen access to HE is not restricted to the UK or Australia. Globally, there are growing concerns about, and a need for, working age adults to remain employable, not only for longer working lives but also to respond to the constant changes in requirements for occupational competence and specific workplace performance (Billett 2006; OECD 2021). These imperatives have arisen because of ageing populations and changes in the kinds of goods and services needed by individuals, their communities and the public and private sector enterprises that employ them. The changes in occupational practices also arise from the advent of new technologies, the need to solve problems and innovate in response to the emerging needs of those served by the occupations, how work is being undertaken and with whom (Billett 2001, 2006; Eraut 2004; Fuller and Unwin 2004; Harteis 2018; Tynjälä 2008, 2013). These kinds of changes are reflected at both the occupational level and within the performance requirements of specific workplaces. Together, these emphasise the need for ongoing HE provisions.

Yet these requirements for work are changing at such a rapid pace that HE institutions may struggle to provide their students with suitable education that can account for the demands of contemporary work practices (e.g., McArthur et al. 2017). Hence, the goals for initial occupational preparation and ongoing professional development are rendered difficult for educators to accurately predict, let alone prepare students for the requirements of the work settings where graduates will find employment. So, there is a need for developmental opportunities for working age adults to address those changes. Often, these are different from and/or go beyond the requirements for which they were initially occupationally prepared. All of this means that not only is there an ongoing and pressing need for working age adults engaged in all kinds and classifications of work to participate in HE (e.g., Leow et al. 2022), but also providing appropriate educational experiences.

Therefore, to widen access, specific measures and pathways may be required for mature age adults to engage successfully in HE provisions that can provide

appropriate experiences. Unlike school leavers whose final years of school have been directed towards successful participation in HE, many mature age adults are inadequately prepared for these tasks. Hence, policies and practices are needed to encourage working age adults to engage with, and participate successfully in, HE, and achieve their desired employability outcomes. Importantly, unlike children attending school compulsorily or young adults needing to participate in HE as preparation for their preferred occupations, working age adults are not so compelled to engage in HE. They will decide whether and how they will engage and participate. This means that HE systems, and those who administer and teach in them, need to invite, encourage and include these adults, making it attractive to them and then assisting their success in, and completion of, programmes that support their employability.

Guiding and Supporting Mature Age Students

As HE moves from an elite to a mass system, its student populations become more diverse, requiring educational and support provisions to accommodate all kinds of students' readiness to participate, including working age adults. Here, readiness refers to adults having the kinds of understandings, procedures and dispositions (i.e., what they know, can do, and value) permitting them to engage productively in activities from which they seek to learn (Billett 2015). As noted, unlike students progressing from high school into HE and being prepared for independent study, their capacities to read for meaning, writing assignments and advanced online search skills are capacities that may not be well developed. Many of these processes are relatively hybrid, and their practices restricted to HE. Hence, mature age students who have either not participated in, or not in a long time, will lack these forms of readiness. Also, engaging in HE studies often sits alongside other commitments and demands, requiring these students to balance different aspects of and across their adult lives, including family employment obligations (Rose 2017; Su et al. 2018). The term 'time jealousy' has been applied to HE students, suggesting that more than being time poor, such are their other commitments that they have to make decisions about how they distribute their time and effort (Billett 2015). This same concept is applicable to working age adults and how they need to be viewed in terms of educational needs. Added to these needs are expectations they will be treated and engaged with as knowledgeable partners (Billett et al. 2024), which is important to their subjectivity (their sense of self) as working age adults (Billett 2008). Given the diversity of their commitments, a wider range of contributions referred to broadly as educative experiences (Billett 2023) is needed for these adults. That is, the need for provisions of support that go beyond direct teaching and comprise facilitation of access to experiences, advice and engagement

that serve to support their learning and development make essential contributions. Moreover, issues of accessibility associated with ease of engagement and flexibility in participation are often key considerations for these adults (Billett et al. 2020), not out of laziness, but to balance participation with other commitments.

One of the often-mentioned capacities for working age adults to effectively engage in learning is their ability to self-regulate or self-direct their learning (Herschell et al. 2010; Steffens 2015). This leads to an expectation that adults need to take control and responsibility of their learning, directing what and how something is learnt (Merriam and Bierema 2014). Yet the ability to act and learn in this way is premised on their readiness, which may be underdeveloped, lacking, or wholly absent. Adults are best able to be self-directed in domains of knowledge with which they are familiar and, unsurprisingly, less so in those about which they know less (Billett 2015). That ability is sometimes viewed as being related to individuals' awareness and understanding of their own thought processes (metacognition) (Robson 2012). Yet all of this is less likely when individuals know little about the knowledge to be learnt and there is a lack of readiness. Indeed, this lack of knowledge is often why they are engaging in educational programmes. That lack of readiness may be reflected in their ability to acquire information or skills independently by interacting with training materials (Herschell et al. 2010), including individuals' literacy, in both the narrow (reading and writing) and the broader sense (e.g., knowing the norms, forms, and practices of HE). The ideal is that HE programmes should work to advance their ability to learn interdependently and independently, set, and achieve, their learning goals. This includes implementing effective learning strategies, monitoring and assessing their goal progress, and establishing a productive learning environment, with bases for securing assistance when needed (Steffens 2015).

So, there is a need for policies and practices to embrace widening access to, guiding, supporting and encouraging mature age adults' engagement with, and successful participation in, HE. This includes educational practices to support and guide them make informed choices about their selections of programmes and engaging effectively and successfully in them (Billett et al. 2023). Yet the approaches and practices adopted by HE institutions and their educators need to be informed about how best to proceed. These are the focuses of the investigation described and reported here. That investigation concentrated on understanding current HE institutional and educational practices and how these might need to change to be more inclusive of mature age students. Specifically, survey data gathered in the UK and Australia are reported and discussed about how to recruit and retain mature age students, and provisions to and practices of guiding and supporting their success in HE and employability outcomes beyond.

Widening Access for Mature Student Initiatives: The UK and Australia Comparative Contexts

The investigation, as already noted, sought to identify current approaches and practices for supporting the participation and success of mature age HE students. It aimed to understand how HE institutions, their departments and educators currently view and enact initiatives to widen access to mature age adults within UK and Australian communities, and how provisions of support and guidance can be effective. A survey was developed and administered between June 2023 and January 2024 in a range of UK and Australian HE institutions, as part of the Widening Access for Mature Students (WAMS) project sponsored by Nelson College, London. The survey gathered anonymous data about current practices for engaging and supporting mature age students' participation in HE. It was aimed at education professionals who hold leadership, administrative, teaching or student support positions in those institutions. The survey was in five sections and sought to understand respondents' demographic factors followed by their views about approaches and practices in their institutions and departments: (i) how mature age students are defined, (ii) institutional and departmental mission, values and practices, (iii) strategic planning and management objectives, (iv) staffing qualities and culture, and (v) provision of support services for mature age students. The survey items consisted of multiple-choice, Likert-scaled and open-ended questions purposely constructed to secure specific types of data. Five-point Likert scales were used to measure, for example, the degree to which staff view having mature age students as positive, and the effectiveness of support measures currently enacted in their institutions and departments.

The administration and distribution of the survey was facilitated through institutional media platforms and engagement with HE institutions that circulated information and links to potential participants. Incentives in the form of prizes were included and described in the information about the survey. A total of 219 responses were analysed for comparing the two HE contexts in this chapter. Descriptive and inferential (Chi-square test) analyses were conducted on the survey data. Beyond general descriptive analyses, a comparison was conducted to identify patterns of responses between the UK's and Australia's HE respondents. Comparative weightings using mean scores (averaged responses) within each country group (UK and Australia) are also represented through rankings of (i) common purposes for identifying mature age students, (ii) activities to engage in widening participation for HE students, (iii) important actors in developing provisions for these students, (iv) goals for developing, managing and implementing them, (v) means of communication about widening access policies and practices and (vi) the relative effectiveness of the provision of support services. In the following sections, data from responses addressing these focuses are presented and discussed.

Background Demographics of the Respondents

Demographic data were gathered from the survey respondents. These included their gender, age groupings and level of education. In addition to these demographic data was the background information regarding their status as a mature student, primary role in their HE institutions and estimated percentage of current mature age students in that institution. Table 3.1 summarises the respondents' background demographics. In this table, these data (variables) and their alignment with specific respondent characteristics (values) are presented in the left-hand columns. Then the number of respondents and how they constituted a percentage of each variable are set out in the two right-hand columns.

As presented in Table 3.1, the UK respondents were predominantly represented by females (61.2%) as compared to males (38.8%), this gender representation being female dominant compared to the almost equal gender

TABLE 3.1 Characteristics of the 219 Respondents

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Values</i>	<i>UK(n=99)</i>		<i>Australia (n=120)</i>	
		<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Gender	Female	60	61.2	57	47.9
	Male	38	38.8	62	52.1
Age	20–29	14	14.1	30	25.2
	29–39	28	28.3	42	35.3
	40–49	25	25.3	30	25.2
	50–59	20	20.2	12	10.1
	60–69	8	8.1	1	.8
	70+	4	4.0	4	3.4
Highest qualification	School leaving qualification	1	1.0	0	.0
	Vocational certificate/diploma	1	1.0	8	6.7
	Degree	37	37.8	89	74.2
	Postgraduate	59	60.2	23	19.2
Being classified as a mature student	Yes	54	54.5	31	26.5
	No	45	45.5	86	73.5
Primary role in the institution	Administration/leadership	56	57.1	53	46.9
	Teaching and learning/guidance and support	42	42.9	60	53.1
% of mature students	0–25%	50	52.1	41	34.5
	26–50%	15	15.6	43	36.1
	51% or above	31	32.3	35	29.4

distribution of the population (Office for National of Statistics [ONS] 2022). The Australian respondents were more equally distributed between females (47.9%) and males (52.1%), and closer to the gender distribution of the Australian population, 50.7% of female and 49.3% of male (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2022). Similar patterns are evident for age distributions with UK respondents being almost equally represented by those aged under 40 (42.4%) and 40 or above (57.6%), being representative of the UK population's age distribution (median age of 40.7) (ONS 2022). The Australian respondents were predominantly in the under-40 group (60.5%), with their age distribution being relatively younger compared to the population (male population with a median age of 37 and female of 39 years old) (ABS 2022). The respondents represent a relatively highly educated segment of the countries' populations, not surprising given their employment: 98% from the UK and 93.4% from Australia reported holding a degree as their highest qualification (diploma/advanced diploma, bachelor's or postgraduate). The sample is, therefore, biased towards those with HE qualifications, and hence experiences of and engagement in HE. This is unlikely to be a crucial impediment to the quality of those who can provide insights into their higher institutions' support services for mature students. Of these respondents, 57.1% (UK) and 46.9% (Australia) indicated their primary role as administration or leadership, and 42.9% (UK) and 53.1% (Australia) in their teaching or guidance and support role. Across these institutions, the estimated percentages of their current mature students differ, ranging from 25% or under (52.1%), 26–50% (15.6%) to 51% or above (32.3%) for the UK, and 34.5%, 36.1% and 29.4%, respectively for Australia. In this regard, the Australian higher institutions were reported to accommodate a greater percentage of mature age students. That is, 65.5% of the Australian respondents as compared to 47.9% of the UK group reported the estimated 26% of students as mature age. In all, this sample indicates a cohort of informed respondents who can assist in an analysis of current practices for supporting participation of mature students in the two countries' HE.

Defining Mature Students in HE

Diverse views about what constitutes a 'mature student' are represented in the data from the respondents' perspectives. Table 3.2 presents those responses and their institutions' initiatives in widening participation for these students. In that table, one-third of the UK respondents (33.3%) and about half of the Australian group (47.5%) classified a person with work/life experiences to be a mature age student. A few others (14.1%) in the UK group and many others (39.2%) in the Australian group indicated mature students being those who failed to gain entrance into HE, thereby classifying them as individuals who did not progress directly from schooling into HE, and as characterised by failure. Based on age, 64.6% (UK) and 43.3% (Australia) suggested those over 21,

and a small number of the respondents indicating those over 18 (8.1%–UK and 12.5%–Australia) or at least 30 years of age (12.1% and 3.3%). Certainly, overall, the responses centre on these students being individuals aged over 21 and with work life experience, which along with having failed to gain HE entrance indicates these students to have distinct profiles and characteristics from those who move directly into HE from schooling.

As presented in Table 3.2, most UK respondents (72.3%) reported their institutions actively identifying mature age students on entry, and more than 84% of these institutions engaged in widening participation for HE. In contrast, only 51.3% of Australian respondents reported their institutions actively identifying these students on entry, and about 49% of the institutions engaged in widening participation for HE. This suggests that more than half of these Australian institutions may not have or actively promote initiatives for mature students, or those working within them.

For those who reported their institutions' engagement in widening participation activities for HE students, they were also asked to indicate the purposes of such activities. Rankings of those from the two countries are presented and compared in Table 3.3 which ranks the list of these purposes and provides a comparison between the UK and Australian respondents. In this table, the purposes are listed on the left-hand column, the overall ranking followed by that from the two countries in the right columns.

TABLE 3.2 Definition and Institutional Engagement in Identifying and Widening Participation

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Values</i>	<i>UK</i>		<i>Australia</i>	
		<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
What constitutes a mature age student?	A person over 18	8	8.1	15	12.5
	A person over 21	64	64.6	52	43.3
	A person with work/life experiences	33	33.3	57	47.5
	A person failed to gain higher entrance	14	14.1	47	39.2
	A person at least 30 years of age	12	12.1	4	3.3
Institutions actively identify mature age students on entry	Yes	60	72.3	61	51.3
	No	8	9.6	47	39.5
	Don't know	15	18.1	11	9.2
Institutions engage in widening participation for higher education students	Yes	70	84.3	59	49.2
	No	5	6.0	52	43.3
	Don't know	8	9.6	9	7.5

TABLE 3.3 Rankings of Common Purposes for Identifying Mature Students

<i>Purposes for Identifying Mature Age Students</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>Australia</i>
To organise appropriate support for their participation in their courses [supp]	1	1	1
To provide opportunities for recognition of prior learning [supp]	2	3	2
To meet Access and Participation targets [inst]	3	2	6
To provide advice and counselling [supp]	4	4	2
To check their eligibility to enter the institution [inst]	5	5	4
To check their likelihood of being able to complete the course [inst]	6	6	4

Notes: **supp** – support for students; **inst** – institutional imperative.

Overall (i.e., All), the three commonest purposes for identifying mature students were: (i) to provide support for students, including appropriate support for their participation in their courses or opportunities for recognition of prior learning [supp] (ranked 1st and 2nd) or (ii) about institutional needs and goals, that is, to meet Access and Participation targets [inst] (ranked 3rd). In this regard, the UK respondents' rankings are aligned with the overall findings, whereas the Australian cohort prioritised the purposes associated with supporting the students themselves. This included providing advice and counselling (ranked 2nd) over institutional imperatives such as meeting Access and Participation targets (ranked 6th – the bottom ranking). Informants from HE in these two countries were indicating quite different balances between supporting mature age students and pursuing institutional imperatives associated with the participation.

Respondents were also provided with a list of activities and asked to indicate those that are commonly used to engage in widening participation for HE students. Responses to these engagement activities are presented in Table 3.4. Again, in this table, the listed activities are on the left and overall ranking and that from the UK and Australian groups on the right-hand columns.

Generally (i.e., All), across both countries, two activities aimed to secure students for those institutions were ranked in the top ranks of the engagement initiatives. These included (i) targeting communities/groups and (ii) advertising in the community. The Australian rankings were like the overall rankings, yet in reverse order (i.e., 2nd former and 1st the latter). The UK respondents gave the same ranking (i.e., 3rd) to the latter. Regarding another activity to secure students (i.e., easing and supporting entrance processes), there was a disparity¹ between the UK and Australian rankings, the activity being ranked 5th by the UK and 8th by the Australian group. For activities associated with mature age students' education, there was a mix of consensus² and disparity between the two groups. For example, three activities that were moderately ranked

TABLE 3.4 Rankings of Activities to Engage in Widening Participation for HE Students

<i>Engagement Activities</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>Australia</i>
Targeting communities/groups who might benefit from this option [eng]	1	1	2
Advertising in the community about this means of accessing HE [eng]	2	3	1
Support and preparation for cohorts of mature students [curr]	3	2	3
Support and preparation for individual mature students [curr]	4	3	4
Easing and supporting entrance processes [eng]	5	5	8
Allocation of resources to support students' success [curr]	6	6	4
Teacher professional development [curr]	7	7	4
Differentiated pathways and assessment [curr]	8	8	4
Special teaching allocation [curr]	9	8	10
Deliberate mainstreaming [curr]	10	10	8

Notes: **eng** – activities to secure students; **curr** – activities associated with their education.

(4th rank for all three) by the Australian group received lower ranks (6th, 7th and 8th) by the UK. These included allocation of resources to support students' success, teacher professional development and differentiated pathways and assessment. Both groups prioritise the curriculum initiative of support and preparation for *cohorts* (ranked 2nd by the UK, 3rd by the Australians) of mature students over the *individuals* (ranked 3rd and 4th). These findings suggest that the Australian group more often engaged in activities associated with students' education to realise their institutional imperatives.

Mission, Values and Practices of Your Institution or Department

To secure respondents' views and gain understanding of the mission, values and practices of their initiatives to engage with mature age students, they were asked if their institutions and departments have a mission or strategic plan to widen access for these students in HE courses and support their progress, retention and completion. The responses are presented in Table 3.5 with the statements in the left-hand column and then, to its right, the number of responses, and then categories of agreement, disagreement and do not know.

Between 31 and 46% of the UK and 53–58% of the Australian respondents reported their institutions did not have, or did not know if they had, a mission or strategic plan for WAMS at departmental or staff level. Indeed, some 43% of the Australian respondents were unaware of any institutional mission or strategic plan. Yet, more than half of the respondents (53.8%) proposed it

TABLE 3.5 Views about Mission or Strategic Plan for WAMS

<i>Mission/Strategic Plan for WAMS</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>% of responses</i>		
			<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Don't know</i>
Institutional level	UK	66	81.8	12.1	6.1
	Australia	119	46.2	42.0	11.8
Departmental level	UK	59	69.5	13.6	16.9
	Australia	118	42.4	49.2	8.5
Staff level	UK	59	54.2	13.6	32.2
	Australia	118	47.5	43.2	9.3
Awareness of the mission/ strategic plan	UK	62	91.9	8.1	
	Australia	120	56.7	43.3	
Influence of the mission on thinking and acting at work	UK	55	96.4	3.6	
	Australia	67	67.2	32.8	
Helpful to have mission statement	UK	5	80.0	20.0	
	Australia	52	53.8	46.2	

would be helpful to have a mission statement as it was reported by 67.2% of the Australian respondents that it would influence their thinking about and acting to support widening participation for mature students. This finding suggests a need for unit level mission to guide and engage staff in widening participation for mature students in both countries and with a particular need in Australia.

Apart from mission and strategic plan for WAMS, participants were asked to indicate important actors in developing further widening access institutional policies and practices. Table 3.6 presents the overall, the UK and Australia group rankings of the listed actors.

As presented in Table 3.6, the three most important actors in developing further widening access institutional policies and practices were those who have direct engagement (face-to-face) with mature students, and their peers (ranked 2nd). This direct engagement includes support and guidance staff (ranked 1st) and teachers (ranked 2nd). These rankings reflect the overall as well as the UK respondent's perspectives, albeit teachers being ranked 3rd. While these three actors were still in the top three of the Australia group's rankings, the importance of teachers was emphasised more, being given the highest rank (1st rank), followed by guidance and support staff (2nd rank) and peer support (3rd rank). Yet, there was a difference in view between the UK and Australia groups in rating the importance of administrators as an institutional actor. That is, they were highly regarded by the Australian (ranked 3rd) yet lowly rated by the UK (7th out of 9). Interestingly, they both gave low rankings to the worth of potential employers' contributions (ranked 8th overall, and by both country groups) in developing WAMS initiatives.

TABLE 3.6 Rankings of Important Actors in Developing WAMS

<i>Actors in Developing WAMS</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>Australia</i>
Support and guidance staff [DE]	1	1	2
Teachers [DE]	2	3	1
Current mature students [PE]	2	2	3
Board members [IN]	4	4	5
Administrators [IN]	5	7	3
Mature age graduates [PE]	5	5	6
Mature members of the community [DE]	7	6	7
Potential employers [IN]	8	8	8
Social workers/employment staff [IN]	9	9	8

Notes: **DE** – that, amongst other direct engagement (i.e., face-to-face), **IN** – institutional actors, **PE** – peers.

TABLE 3.7 Rankings of Goals for Developing, Managing and Implementing WAMS

<i>Goals for Developing, Managing and Implementing WAMS</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>Australia</i>
Greater equity [ST]	1	1	1
More engaged students [ST]	2	2	2
Second chance students [ST]	3	3	4
More students [IN]	4	4	5
Heighten institutional standing [IN]	5	6	3
Mature age student base [IN]	6	7	5
More funding/government support [IN]	7	5	7

Notes: **ST** – goals associated with students; **IN** – goals associated with institutions.

When asked about the key goals for developing, managing and implementing WAMS initiatives, those associated with students (support for students themselves) were ranked highly. These included initiatives for greater equity, more engaged students and second chance students. Table 3.7 summarises the rankings associated with these goals.

Regarding rating goals associated with institutional imperatives for widening access, there was a mix of consensus and disparity between the UK and Australia's rankings. While heighten institutional standing was considered one of the key goals by the Australian respondents, ranking it 3rd, it was less prioritised by the UK counterparts, ranking it 6th out of 7. An increased number of mature students (more students – ranked 4th) was considered an important institutional goal by the UK, yet 5th by the Australian counterparts. Overall, it is noted that concerns about equity are strongly represented in both cohorts' responses. This indicates then there is a will and interest in achieving positive outcomes for these students.

Strategic Planning and Managerial Objectives

The survey respondents' views about their institutions' strategic planning and management objectives of initiatives for mature age students were also sought. Firstly, they were asked if there are any staff or managers responsible for WAMS either at the institutional or departmental level (*see* Table 3.8). Across two country cohorts, more than half of the respondents reported no staffing identified for this role or did not know about it.

As a comparison, 51.7% of the Australian and 38.3% of the UK respondents reported no staffing identified for this role or did not know about it at the institutional level and 47.5% and 46.6%, respectively, reported that at the departmental level. This is not surprising as many of the Australian respondents (43.3%) were not aware of their institutional mission and strategic plan for widening access and participation initiatives, and had limited awareness of any mission or strategic plans for WAMS initiatives at unit levels (departmental and staff) in both country groups (*see* Table 3.5).

To understand further the managerial objectives of WAMS initiatives, participants were asked to indicate the institutional practices in communicating their policies and practices about mature students. Table 3.9 shows the overall ranking of frequency of these practices as well as comparison between the UK and Australia's group rankings.

Generally, the three most common means of communication about WAMS policies and practices were through written policies, staff meetings and professional development activities (ranked 1st, 2nd and 3rd, respectively). Also, worth of mouth was considered helpful for communicating about the policies/practices (ranked 3rd). These rankings reflect the overall and UK group's perspectives. While the Australian group emphasised the ultimate importance of written policies and professional development activities (both ranked 1st) through which the WAMS policies and practices are communicated, they did not see staff meetings (ranked 5th) or word of mouth (ranked 6th) effective platforms for communication. Instead, they considered statements in course profiles and promotional videos to be helpful for this purpose, ranking them 3rd and 4th, respectively, as compared to lower rank of 6th on both by the UK

TABLE 3.8 Staffing for WAMS Initiatives

<i>Identifiable staff or managers responsible for WAMS</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>% of responses</i>		
			<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Don't know</i>
At the institutional level	UK	60	61.7	20.0	18.3
	Australia	120	48.3	36.7	15.0
At the departmental level	UK	58	53.4	20.7	25.9
	Australia	120	52.5	38.3	9.2

TABLE 3.9 Means of Communication about WAMS Policies/Practices

<i>Communication of Policies and Practices about Mature Students</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>Australia</i>
Written policies [IN]	1	1	1
Staff meetings [IN]	2	2	5
Professional development activities [IN]	3	3	1
Word of mouth	4	3	6
Statements on admission forms [IN]	5	5	7
Statements in course profiles [IN]	6	6	3
Promotional videos [IN]	7	6	4
Not communicated [IN]	8	10	8
Staff appraisals [IN]	9	9	9
Institutional audits [IN]	9	8	10

Note: IN – institutional practices.

TABLE 3.10 Rankings of Evaluation Means of WAMS Initiatives

<i>Evaluation of Support Provided to and Success of Mature Age Students</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>Australia</i>
Graduation data	1	2	2
Admission information	2	3	4
Student retention data	2	1	5
Student profile characteristics	4	4	3
Requests for library/guidance and support staff	5	6	1
Teaching and course assessments	6	5	7
Don't know	7	8	6
Complaints	8	7	8

counterparts. This finding suggests the Australian higher institutions were deemed to more often engage in formal means of communication to inform about their policies/practices.

In terms of evaluating WAMS initiatives (support provided to and success of mature age students), different data sources for evaluation are ranked in Table 3.10, including overall and the two groups' ratings.

Overall, graduation data, admission information, and student retention data were the three key means of evaluation (i.e., ranked in the top three). Yet, there was a disparity between the two groups in these rankings. That is, while student retention data was highly regarded by the UK (ranked 1st), it was not considered as a main source of evaluation by Australia (ranked 5th). Interestingly, for the Australian respondents, requests for library, guidance and support staff were considered the key data source for evaluating the success of their WAMS initiative (ranked 1st). This may mean these institutions rely on

student requests to better understand their needs and expectations to provide appropriate and relevant support. However, this also suggests a lack of proactive approaches towards understanding mature age students.

Staffing Qualities and Culture

Through understanding staff experiences with mature age students, staffing qualities and culture can be illuminated through such survey data. Hence, participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they view having mature age students as positive, ranging from *Very positive* to *Challenging*. Their responses are summarised in Table 3.11.

Surprisingly, more than half of the respondents (i.e., 50.6%) reported their experience as not being positive or challenging. This raises the concern about perceived difficulties associated with teaching and supporting mature age students. When comparing the experience of mature age student inclusion, there were statistically significant differences between two groups. Table 3.12 provides the results of Chi-square tests performed on the experience by country. In this table, the groups are listed on the left-hand column. On the right-hand columns are sample size of each group, percentage of responses to the 5-point Likert scale describing the experience (very positive, some positive aspects, no problems, not a positive inclusion and challenging). The Chi-square probability value *p* (denoting the significance) is cited at the far-right column.

As presented in Table 3.12, a vast majority of the Australian respondents (72.9%) reported not positive and challenging experience with mature age

TABLE 3.11 Experience with Mature Age Student Inclusion

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Values</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Experience with mature students	Very positive	51	29.3
	Some positive aspects	29	16.7
	No problems	6	3.4
	Not a positive inclusion	84	48.3
	Challenging	4	2.3

TABLE 3.12 Country Differences on Experience with Mature Age Students

	<i>Country</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Very positive</i>	<i>Some positive</i>	<i>No problems</i>	<i>Not positive</i>	<i>Challenging</i>	<i>Chi-sq p</i>
Experience with mature students	UK	56	60.7	32.1	3.6	0.0	3.6	.000***
	Aus	118	14.4	9.3	3.4	71.2	1.7	

*** denotes $p < .001$.

students, whereas this percentage is minimal (i.e., 3.6%) with the UK cohort. This is a positive finding on the UK part, yet concerning for the Australian institutions and students. This raises concerns about their views, perceptions and practices when facing difficulties and challenges associated with teaching and supporting mature age students.

Provision of Widening Access for Mature Students Support Services

Last, but foremost, is to understand the reported effectiveness of measures of support for mature age students in HE courses currently being enacted in the participants' institutions and departments. To that end, the respondents were given a list of measures and asked to indicate the level of effectiveness of these on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from *Very effective* to *Not very effective*. Table 3.13 summarises rankings of effectiveness of the measures using mean scores (i.e., averaged response – the lower the mean scores, the higher the level of effectiveness). Rankings from the UK and Australia groups were compared against the overall ranking.

Overall, the three most effective measures were: (i) Differentiated pathways and assessment, (ii) Support and preparation for *cohorts* of mature students and (iii) Allocation of resources to support mature age students' success. With these three measures, there was a disparity between the two groups. The first measure was considered the most effective by the UK group (1st rank), yet least effective by the Australia counterpart (6th – the bottom rank). The second recorded another reverse response pattern. That is, being considered a highly effective measure by the Australian group (ranked 1st), yet the second least effective by the UK (ranked 5th). Interestingly, the disparity between the two groups also exists in their rankings of (i) Support and preparation for

TABLE 3.13 Effectiveness of Measures of Support for Mature Age Students in HE Courses

<i>Measures of Support for Mature Age Students</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>Australia</i>
Differentiated pathways and assessment	1	1	6
Support and preparation for individual mature age students	2	5	1
Allocation of resources to support mature age students' success	3	2	4
Support and preparation for cohorts of mature age students	4	4	2
Advertising, encouraging mature age students to enrol	5	3	5
Easing and supporting entrance processes	6	6	3

individual mature age students, (ii) Advertising, encouraging mature age students to enrol and (iii) Easing and supporting entrance processes. The first was considered the second most effective measure (2nd rank) by the Australian group, yet moderately by the UK (4th). A reverse pattern was found for the second. That is, the measure being considered highly effective (3rd rank) by the UK group, yet the second least effective (5th) by the Australian counterpart. Another reverse pattern of response was recorded for the third measure. That is, it was ranked highly effective (3rd) by Australian respondents, yet least effective (6th – bottom rank) by the UK group. Rankings of effectiveness of two measures: support for *individuals* and differentiated pathways recorded statistically significant differences between the two groups ($p=.012$ and $p<.001$, respectively) (*see* Table 3.14).

As presented in Table 3.14, they indicated support for individuals was an effective measure (very and some aspects), with 72.2% of the UK respondents expressing this sentiment as compared to 52.5% of the Australian counterpart. Regarding differentiated pathways and assessment, while around 64% of the Australian group considered it an effective measure of WAMS support services, only 46.3% of the UK respondents considered it effective. Yet, 24.1% of these informants indicated this measure was not available in their institutions. So, beyond the distinctions in purposes outlined in Table 3.3, here are reported distinct differences in supportive measures across the two national HE systems.

Discussion and Conclusions

In sum, the survey respondents are broadly representative of the Australian gender distribution, yet predominantly females of the UK population. The Australian sample is relatively young as compared to UK counterparts. They represent a relatively highly educated segment of both country populations, not surprisingly. They work in administration or leadership, and teaching or guidance and support roles in their HE institutions. Hence, this sample indicates a group of respondents who can provide informed insights into current approaches and practices of their HE institutions’ guidance and support for mature age

TABLE 3.14 Country Differences on the Provision of WAMS Support Services

<i>Measures of Support</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>VE</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>CBI</i>	<i>NVE</i>	<i>NA</i>	<i>Chi-sq p</i>
Support and preparation for individual students	UK	54	25.9	46.3	24.1	0.0	3.7	.012*
	Australia	118	17.8	34.7	26.3	18.6	2.5	
Differentiated pathways and assessment	UK	54	16.7	29.6	20.4	9.3	24.1	.000***
	Australia	120	28.3	35.8	20.8	12.5	2.5	

Notes: * denotes $p<.05$, *** $p<.001$; **VE** – Very effective; **SE** – Some aspects effective; **CBI** – Could be improved; **NVE** – Not very effective; **NA** – Not available.

students. They offer diverse views about how they define a mature age student, which may reflect institutional practices. Overall, mature age students are perceived to include individuals aged over 21 and with work life experience, including those who have failed to gain direct HE entrance. This aligns with previous classification of mature age students, ranging between 21 and 35 years of age in different states and at different times (Eaton 1980; Harvey et al. 2016).

The findings also indicate that the purpose of identifying mature age students differ by country. That is, they indicated quite different balances between supporting mature age students and institutional imperatives associated with their participation in those institutions. Yet, they both indicate a will and interest in achieving positive outcomes for mature age students through concerns about equity. Comparing views of the two country groups reveals key differences between the two regarding their policies, approaches, practices, and provisions of support services for mature aged students. Interestingly, both country groups do not appear to prioritise the potential of employment outcomes in their survey responses which may risk undervaluing the collaboration or partnership with potential employers to realise these outcomes for their students. Perhaps WAMS initiatives in these institutions were not driven by an employability agenda. When it comes to evaluating these initiatives, while the UK group focussed on student retention data, the Australia group, surprisingly, considered requests for library/guidance and support staff as the key means of evaluation.

In all, it was found that having clear goals associated with engaging mature age adults and having identified processes and responsibilities associated with achieving them are likely to be important, given the diverse demands and imperatives that educators confront. All of this is particularly germane given the findings, associated with staff experience when interacting and engaging with mature age students at either institutional or classroom level in the Australian context. A concerning number of the staff (72.9%) reported not positive and even challenging experiences regarding mature age student inclusion. This raises concern about their responses to difficulties and challenges associated with managing and supporting mature age students in Australia. Indeed, research indicates that all students must adjust to new learning environments in HE institutions, but mature age students may have additional difficulties of having a minority status, and their readiness arising from having little recent involvement in formal education provisions, and having additional responsibilities and commitments outside the educational setting (O'Donnell and Tobbell 2007). Yet, the limitations to institutional readiness are evident in these responses. Even though almost half of the respondents who indicated that their HE institutions identify these students, those that did placed the emphasis on recruitment and retention, but not optimally recognising and addressing the challenges faced by those who have traditionally been

structurally excluded from such institutions (David 2011). If HE institutions wish to grow and support mature age learners and widen access to HE for this older cohort of students, they need to understand the relational dynamics of mature age students' negotiating their participation with other kinds of commitments. This includes guiding them to respond to the hybrid practices of these institutions, such as assignment writing and being isolated from and unfamiliar with academic practices. They need to find ways to encourage and support mature age students with their differing priorities, needs and approaches to engaging in education. All of this has important implications for HE processes and curriculum to acknowledge and be adjusted to accommodate and encourage different learning preferences connected to these adults' subjectivities and (work)life pathways (Gale and Parker 2014). Consequently, institutional imperatives such as clear policies, lines of responsibilities and assisting both mature age students and educators who are unfamiliar with engaging with them would seem to be important considerations to achieve these goals.

In those institutions where support services for mature ages students were reported as being enacted, three indicators – differentiation, support and preparation for individuals, and ease of entrance processes – were reported to be the most effective measures. Such provisions of support can assist and shift responsibility for learning away from the individual as traditionally seen in neoliberal discourse (Olssen 2006). That is, more considerations and practices need to be given to the historically structured disadvantage experiences by many mature age adults. This suggests that for HE institutions to act effectively to widen access, participation and success for mature age students, it is pivotal for them to progress beyond the orthodoxy of engaging with younger students who have been prepared for entrance to, and success in, HE. These institutions may need to accommodate students with differing educational narratives and needs, even though it is perhaps easier and more convenient to promote and treat students as flexible individualised learners (Mallman and Lee 2016). In all, as HE continues to expand, and mature age students form majorities of HE student populations, undoubtedly their interests, needs and dispositions to learning will have a greater influence on HE culture and practices. Hence, it is necessary to take into consideration what is happening at both the institutional and classroom level for these students should initiatives for mature age students be judged to be effective. However, these institutions need to make themselves more ready to engage with those students to ensure their success.

Notes

- 1 Two or more rank difference.
- 2 The same or one rank difference.

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4

INTERNATIONAL BENCHMARKING EXERCISE ON WIDENING ACCESS FOR MATURE STUDENTS

Report and Benchmarking Statements

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Introduction

There is a growing concern among supra-national agencies (e.g. OECD, UNESCO), national governments and enterprises for sustaining working age adults' employability across lengthening working lives. These working age adults are also often increasingly conscious of their need to engage in continuing education and training to realise their employability. This includes being able to respond to constantly changing occupational and workplace requirements. While much of the learning to realise these goals can be achieved through experiences in work settings, there is also a need to participate in tertiary education (i.e. vocational and higher) programmes. This is particularly the case when significant changes in technologies occur or when working age adults are moving from one occupation or field of practice to another. Consequently, access to and participation in tertiary education provisions has become pivotal to achieving such goals. However, returning to some type of formal education as a mature age student is a challenge for these working age adults. These challenges may stem from factors such as long absences from academic study, evolving educational requirements or competing work and family commitments. Hence, there may need to be specific pathways to assist mature age adults engage successfully in tertiary education provisions for which they may not have been adequately prepared. This requires institutional engagement in providing guidance and support for this older demographic, which is the key element of widening access mature students (WAMS) initiatives in tertiary education institutions. This report presents and discusses approaches to how this might be achieved by drawing on survey data gathered and benchmarking discussions focusing on approaches and practices of

recruitment, education and retention of tertiary mature age students. It was found that there were differences between how vocational education institutions and universities view mature age students and seek to engage and enrol them in their programmes. For instance, respondents from vocational education reported prioritising employment outcomes, thereby valuing the collaboration or partnership with potential employers to realise these outcomes for their mature age students, much more so than was reported by university-based respondents. Perhaps such emphasis is driven by the strong focus of vocational education in these institutions. When it comes to evaluating WAMS initiatives, while the university group focused on the graduation data, the vocational education respondents referred to student retention as the key measure, as attrition was reported as an ongoing issue within that sector. An important and surprising finding in the survey of Australian institutions was about the views of teaching staff about interacting and engaging with mature age students at either institutional or classroom level, with almost 80% reporting those experiences to be negative and challenging thereby raising questions about how mature age students might be included in these education provisions, and perhaps the need for staff development associated with managing and supporting those students. Often, it seems that the efforts extended to recruit mature age students are not then replicated in finding ways to support their success within those programmes. Part of assisting with successful education experiences possibly includes preparing working age adults to be effective independent and interdependent students. So, in sum, institutional priorities and arrangements may need to be tailored to the needs of mature age students, as well as approaches to teaching and, for those adults, how they go about engaging and learning through tertiary education provisions.

The Qualitative Benchmarking Technique

Qualitative benchmarking is a way of finding, analysing, developing and adopting good practices with a view to improving management processes by understanding how effective differing approaches are in improving the experience for customers, users, clients and stakeholders (Baker and Ellis, 2023). Benchmarking in its various forms can be used for service development and improvement, for demonstrating efficiency and or effectiveness and for organisational and leadership learning.

It works, at least partly, through allowing organisations to identify their comparative strengths and weaknesses, formulating possible routes to (further) improvement, but in a collegiate and supportive environment where institutional weaknesses can be exposed so that, if done well, the exercise can move beyond superficial analysis. It provides an opportunity to involve individuals and groups outside an organisation and, indeed, across different sectors. Stapenhurst (2009) describes the technique as ‘A method of measuring and

improving our organisational performance by comparing ourselves with the best' (Stapenhurst, 2009, p. 18).

Benchmarking is a tool for dialogue and relationship building. It is a methodology to review and improve service delivery, strategy development and strategic alignment, 'but it is an approach which does something more and which sits well in the education professional's tradition of sharing of coming together in our formal and informal networks to share what we do (including our innovations and the things that are not going well) with our closest peers' (Williams, 2023, p. 35–36).

The benchmarking participants were asked to observe the Chatham House Rules of Confidentiality. In practice, this meant that after the workshop 'participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed' (Chatham House Code of Conduct, 2025).

The International Benchmarking Exercise

The face-to-face element of the exercise was a workshop titled *Benchmarking the WAMS Welcome: Access, Participation and Support in Higher Education* and it took place on Thursday 19 October 2023 at Nelson College London with participants attending in-person and online. The exercise was the result of a collaboration between Nelson College London, Griffith University, Australia, and David Baker Consulting. The workshop facilitator was Professor Stephen Billett (Professor of Adult and Vocational Education, Griffith University; Honorary Research Fellow, Department of Education, University of Oxford).

Aim and Rationale

1 Workshop Aim

The aim of the workshop was to engage participants in considering how mature students can come to gain access to, participate in and be supported to be successful in higher education.

2 Workshop Rationale

It is increasingly acknowledged that working age adults need to participate in continuing education across lengthening working lives and one means of that education is through higher education provisions. Yet, there may be unnecessary and unhelpful barriers that limit the accessibility of higher education programmes to these adults, these students may lack the readiness to participate effectively in those programmes, and that these provisions may not always be organised and enacted in ways which are commensurate with the needs of adults who have family, work and community commitments on top of those associated with studying. Consequently, there is a need to understand how best to inform and engage mature age adults about higher education programmes, their requirements and means of participating in them.

By undertaking the benchmarking exercise, participants benefited by being able to:

- i Identify and analyse their own institution's approach and practices in regard to widening access for mature students
- ii Identify their comparative strengths and weaknesses
- iii Formulate possible routes to (further) improvement
- iv Understand how effective differing approaches are in improving the experience for customers, users, clients and stakeholders
- v Use their experience for service development and improvement
- vi Use their experience to demonstrate efficiency and/or effectiveness, and for organisational and leadership learning

Participants

Institutions

Eight institutions took part in the benchmarking exercise and were located in Nigeria, Mexico, Australia and the UK. These institutions are listed alphabetically below:

Arts University Plymouth (AUP), UK

The UK's newest specialist Arts University, originally the Plymouth Drawing School, has over 1,500 students on courses covering a range of disciplines and levels including Pre-Degree level. The Students Union has a Mature Students' Society. AUP welcomes applications from mature students who may not have the qualification profile but have other experience and knowledge. All applicants will be required to show a portfolio of creative work. AUP offers an Extended BA entry year programme which is Year One of a four-year degree and is designed as a preparatory year to make students ready for the transition to the full degree programme of their choice. <https://www.aup.ac.uk/>

East Anglia University (UEA), UK

Established in 1963, UEA is regarded as one of the top 30 universities in the UK and is in the top 20 for research quality (REF 2021, 2025). It currently has around 17,000 students. Over 17% of the undergraduate population are classed as mature students – being over 21. There is a mature student peer support group. Free online courses are offered for prospective mature students and a specific day is set aside for mature student offer holders. The UEA is aiming to increase mature student intake and retention beyond the first year of study. Mature students at UEA achieve degrees at similar levels to the wider undergraduate population. Mature students at UEA also perform well in progression

to employment. The target is to ensure mature students have a similar student experience in terms of retention and success. This also applies to students who had an interrupted education, or who are parents or who have other caring responsibilities. Widening participation is part of the core university strategy and management roles reflect this. There are also widening participation officers embedded within faculties.

Griffith University, Australia

Griffith University was established in 1975 and has over 55,000 students. It offers early years childcare from 7.30am to 6pm, Monday to Friday. More than 50% of the student population comprise mature students (also often called adult learners or mature age students). These are students who have taken a gap between school and university and may have taken alternative pathways to university based on other education or experience. Griffith University employs experts to help mature students settle into university life and study. Outreach activities are held with partnering TAFEs, community colleges, VET providers and community service organisations to raise higher-education aspirations of mature students. There are multiple routes for mature First Peoples to apply to university and gain specific tutor support. <https://www.griffith.edu.au/student-support/outreach-and-engagement/mature-students>

ICMP (Institute of Contemporary Music Performance), UK

ICMP was established in 1986. There are currently 1,200 students and 66% are mature students. ICMP runs regular Mature Students Welcome Days for anyone who will be over the age of 21 when they start their ICMP course. <https://www.icmp.ac.uk/student-life>

Istituto Marangoni, UK

The Istituto was founded in Italy in 1935 and has operated a London campus since 2003. The School continues to enhance opportunities for students, alumni and prospective students to engage in academic, school and local outreach community activities with additional investment to improve equality of opportunity for under-represented groups in partnership with local and national sector associations. Renewed emphasis on widening access and participation continues throughout the continuation of Saturday Clubs, industry corporate partnerships and through scholarships and bursaries. Overall, the London School has been strategically developing its UK access support within an international school to attract and enhance our UK student community. <https://www.istitutomarangoni.com/en>

Jos University, Nigeria

The University of Jos was, from 1971, originally a campus of the University of Ibadan. However, with the expansion of higher education in Nigeria, it became an institution in its own right in 1975. The University of Jos is a government-owned institution with a vision of nurturing a world-class institution for academic excellence and innovation with local, national and global impact. The University has a total student population of 53,639 (29,448 males and 24,191 females) students of which 45,287 (24,862 males and 20,425 females) are at the undergraduate level. Most of the mature students that come for undergraduate courses are found in the Faculties of Education and the Social Sciences. The University has both local and international institutional affiliations. Some of the local institutions are St. Alberts Institute of Higher Education, Federal College of Education, Pankshin and National Film Institute, Jos. The University has Memoranda of Understanding with the University of Piraeus, Piraeus Greece and the University of Iowa, United States on educational, training and research cooperation in the Faculty of Education. <https://www.unijos.edu.ng/>

Nelson College London, UK

Nelson College, founded in 2009, is an independent college of higher education offering courses in the fields of Business and Hospitality Management. Most of its approximately 1,400 students are aged 18–45. In fact, 94% of students are classed as mature students with non-traditional educational backgrounds. Strategic planning aims to ensure that all students receive equality of opportunity to succeed. Nelson College aims to support students from application onwards and has a personal tutor system tailored to student's individual needs. <https://nelsoncollege.ac.uk/access-and-participation-plans>

Universidad Autónoma de Chihuahua, Mexico

The university was established in 1954, based on the Scientific and Literary Institute founded in 1835. It has over 27,000 students at two main campuses and several other smaller sites. It is the highest-ranked University in Mexico. <http://english.unam.mx/>

Participant Job Roles

The job roles of the eight workshop participants fell into two broad categories (i) Administration or leadership roles or (ii) Support, guidance and teaching roles. The formal job title of participants is listed below:

- Director, Alumni Relations
- Assistant Dean Student Experience

- Widening Participation Officer, Mature Students
- Admissions, Recruitment & Marketing Registrar
- Manager of Knowledge Exchange Centre
- President, Association for International Education
- Senior Research Assistant
- Access and Participation Manager

Preparation for Workshop

Prior to taking part in the face-to-face workshop held on 19 October 2023, participants were asked to complete an online survey which provided the themes and scope of the workshop. The results of this survey are presented in Chapter 3 of this book.

Workshop Report

The structure of the 2-hour workshop was as follows:

- 1 Welcome and introductions
- 2 Plenary presentation by Professor Billett to introduce the topic
- 3 Two breakout groups to discuss the three workshop questions - see below (20 minutes)
- 4 Plenary feedback session
- 5 Conclusion and next steps

Presentation

The workshop discussion was preceded by a presentation by Professor Stephen Billett which provided the context and preliminary results of the online survey (data collected in Australia and the UK). Among the overall findings of the survey, it was found that 78% of Australian respondents found the experience of working with mature age students ‘Not Positive’, raising concerns for the management and support provided by institutions. For the Australian dataset, 87% of respondents were under 40 years of age and most were held administration/leadership roles as opposed to teaching/guidance roles. This raises questions about institutional practices and the potential role for benchmarking in the strategic direction institutions take.

A full report of the survey and its findings are presented in Chapter 3 of this book. The survey, and in turn, the benchmarking workshop, focused on identifying acceptable practices and outcomes with regard to attracting and retaining mature age students and understanding the ways in which institutions are meeting those standards. The survey and the exercise were structured around (i) informing, (ii) engaging and (iii) supporting mature age students.

Workshop Activity

The eight participants were divided into two breakout groups to address the following questions: Group 1 was tasked with addressing Questions 1 and 2; Group 2 was tasked with addressing Question 3. The organisers of the exercise (authors of this chapter) distributed themselves among the groups to support the focus of the discussion and to report back to the whole group.

- Question 1 How best can working age adults with limited knowledge of higher education provisions be informed about their entry requirements, means of engagement and potential outcomes?
- Question 2 How should the entry requirements for higher education programmes be nuanced to encourage and secure engagement by working age adults?
- Question 3 How should the provisions of higher education programmes be organised and enacted to make them accessible to, supportive of and securing positive outcomes for working age adults?

Findings

Headline Findings

For the purpose of this report, the findings from Questions 1 and 2 were conflated and appear below under the general heading *Informing potential students*. Findings from Question 3 appear below under the general heading *Organisation and enacting of programmes*.

Headline Findings	
<i>Informing potential students</i> <i>Questions 1 and 2</i>	<i>Organisation and enacting of programmes</i> <i>Question 3</i>
<p>The proportion of mature students versus traditional students in an institution tends to determine the approach to reaching out to mature students and methods of doing so.</p> <p>Some institutions are more self-conscious than others with regard to their provision for mature students.</p>	<p>Understanding the psychology of mature students can be based on the individual or the group. While there is a drive towards individual learning plans while enrolled, is there a drive towards the group approach for recruitment?</p> <p>The group identity of mature students can be pre-defined by some institutions. Is this valued by students and does it provide them with agency to succeed?</p>

Some institutions are comfortable with their approach of not recruiting mature students.

Understanding the local economic and labour conditions and their relationship to demand for education is important for some institutions.

For some institutions recruitment of widening access mature students begins an empowerment process which is integral to success in enrolment.

There is an argument for working with local agencies and authorities to identify gaps in skills.

Do institutions agree that there are courses which are intrinsically attractive to widening access mature students? Is it useful to know this and develop this idea? Where does learning for its own sake fit in?

The extent of data gathering on retention of mature students is unknown and deserves attention.

Detailed Findings

In this section, information gathered during the discussions and points made by participants are presented for each group in turn. Comments are arranged under thematic titles. The acronym WAMS is used by some participants to refer to a particular body of students (Widening Access for Mature Students).

Group 1

Question 1: How best can working age adults with limited knowledge of higher education provisions be informed about their entry requirements, means of engagement and potential outcomes?

Question 2: How should the entry requirements for higher education programmes be nuanced to encourage and secure engagement by working age adults?

Contrasting Institutions

- Two participating institutions were made up of 55–65% of mature students.
- One institution has 35% WAMS which is made up of 21–28 years olds plus a few over 50s who are more likely to be part-time and semi-retired. A large number of ex-military personnel join the access to HE courses.

- In North Texas University, ex-military students pay for courses with funding provided to them on leaving the forces.
- One institution calls itself a WAMS institution. It could be the case because of the nature of the courses it offers or because of something else. The motto of this institution is 'Learning brought to life'. The majority of students are 30+ years old. WAMS is all about life experience and bringing life to learning, The College has previously targeted specific audiences – access routes through HNDs, business, hospitality, foundation degrees and top ups, Master's. Self-confidence and self-esteem are very powerful concepts for mature students.
- One institution has 90–95% younger students and therefore their focus for mature students is on integration and on 'relearning how to learn'. Also, there is a different approach by mature students who want to be business-like and younger students who are more relaxed.

To target or not to target

- One of the institutions which has 55+% of mature students proactively targets younger students to rebalance the population.
- Some institutions are not as proactive in recruiting mature students, consciously so, and were comfortable with their methods.
- Other institutions seemed to be proactive where there was an access and participation plan (APP) driving the desire to recruit mature students.
- Some institutions do not set recruitment targets, but this may be the case in the future and these targets will need to be reached.

The importance of local economies

- One institution, as always, had a high number of mature students, not by design but as a function of the local demographic profile. These profiles can change, however, if economic development/regeneration takes place in an area. They haven't proactively gone out to recruit mature students, but they do bring a lot of richness to an institution.
- Where there is high unemployment, there is a pattern of people returning to higher education to try and increase their chances of employment. This is an economic factor.

Recruitment methods

- Although a small population at university, recruitment of indigenous students is most effective when communities are targeted by word of mouth.

- Using short courses is a good starting point to attract students to come in and get a feel for HE so that they then start to 'relax into it', which would overcome some of the barriers.
- Being more targeted in the approach rather than more scattergun – going to a smaller event, where you might get 10 people who are already potentially interested in HE.
- Drawing connections through other areas of access can be useful. Opportunities to work with younger children, linking with parents and carers are some examples.

Empowerment doing the work of recruitment

- In Australia, within indigenous communities, a major barrier is the lack of visible exemplars of the economic benefits of education – if you can't see it, you can't be it. To what degree is that a factor in engaging mature students? Give people the realisation that they can do it.
- Prospective WAMS students need to know that pathways to higher education are available, approachable and affordable.

What is in the minds of mature students?

- We need research on why mature students might be interested in coming to HE. What would bring them in? Career curiosity, further learning, career change, new career pathways, etc. This detailed research would help with the targeting of those students and may identify barriers, fears and economic factors that are holding them back. Should we be looking at societal factors?
- What is the influence of parents of students? Reading University has carried out research on Parental Over-Aspirations. https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/44843/1/MurayamaAspiration_fin_afterproof.pdf
- The reasons for returning to study in the first place are varied. Some people return to study for interest, rather than career led purposes, but there are larger proportions that aim for the vocational type courses.
- What are people hoping for when they start and what are they hoping for at the end? How useful and significant is the appeal by recruiters to future possible selves?

Stereotypical courses

- Are some courses naturally more relevant to mature students? An institution may aim to offer the full portfolio of courses but some are the big recruiters, which then can stereotype mature students.

- Some courses make it easier to attract mature students while some courses contain greater barriers.
- Do we need a societal approach to both the recruitment of mature students and the organisation of the provisions following enrolment?

Working with external bodies to meet industry needs

- One UK-based institution works with the local authority to assist them developing provision where there are gaps. This helps the institution to focus on filling vocational gaps and to shape their offer, for example in the areas of social work, health care, teaching assistants. Funding can be a barrier for mature students to enrol on these courses but conversations can be opened up with local authorities on subsidising study pathways.
- Another institution considers relationships with employers is important for widening access. Due to the personal cost to students of higher education, the emphasis in recruitment is on courses which can lead to a job. This has widened thinking and understanding of what could be possible.

Group 2

Question 3: How should the provisions of higher education programmes be organised and enacted to make them accessible to, supportive of and securing positive outcomes for working age adults?

Current support for mature students

- One type of support is to focus on the balance of learning, work and life – work with mature students on how to balance all factors.
- Many institutions refer to tailored support. What does this mean? There is academic support and pastoral support.
- Student feedback is a key route to supporting students effectively.
- One institution builds in needs such as tech support into the learning day, when students are on site. They work with lecturers to encourage and demonstrate VLE usage during class and in lunchtime workshops.
- Challenge for mature students is learning the academic skills.
- One institution offers students who are thinking of withdrawing an intermission in order to take a break in studies rather than leaving.

- It was agreed that an individual approach works best and that there should be an appreciation of this. It is not good to lump students together by age or by any other factor.
- There is a need for improved advocacy around the WAMS profile.
- Provision of a Careers Centre is a must, as is support for students who want to be entrepreneurs and mental health services.

Identifying barriers

- We need to improve recognition of the reality of challenges faced by mature students, for example, commuting and cost-of-living difficulties.
- Coastal and rural deprivation should also be considered and the challenges it brings in terms of local transport infrastructure.
- Mature students need access to library facilities 24/7, language support and improved virtual learning provision. Providing virtual resources and learning is a challenge for a practical subject like Art, however.
- Online learning is becoming increasingly popular, but it could be a barrier for WAMS. Digital inclusion is needed, especially for indigenous people in regional and remote areas where broadband/mobile internet is expensive and unreliable.
- The layout of a campus can be a barrier.

Measures to remove barriers

- Individual learning plans are used in some institutions, but one institution found that the voluntary uptake of these is fairly low among mature students. This relies on self-evaluation of needs and a request for support.
- One institution uses case studies in the classroom to aid the learning and teaching of mature students.
- One institution has indigenous student support units and officers.
- Some institutions have teams to promote social and engagement activities.
- Students with special needs are supported with a separate department which incorporates equipment and technology support.

Data gathering by institutions

- Institutions can lack data on retention and how this relates to a sense of belonging among mature students. 'Mattering' is a concept that perhaps should supplant 'belonging'.

Conclusion

This chapter is based on an international qualitative benchmarking exercise that took place in September–October 2023. The exercise complemented survey research which was carried out alongside and which gathered data from academic staff in Australia and the UK. Chapter 3 of this book reports on the latter piece of research. Participants in the benchmarking exercise were from eight institutions located in Nigeria, Mexico, Australia and the UK. The themes highlighted by the exercise included recruitment methods (word of mouth, short courses, community engagement), the significance of local economies, the needs of industries, empowerment of mature students (strategies to include visible success stories, awareness of pathways), the thought processes of mature students, the existence of stereotypical courses of interest to mature students, institutional support, barriers, removing barriers and data gathering by institutions. Given the variability, socio-economic differences and geographical spread of the institutions involved, institutional approaches must be context-dependent. However, benchmarking can play a role in identifying best practices, fostering collaboration between institutions and shaping policy recommendations that contribute to more effective and inclusive higher education provisions for mature students. The interest in the benchmarking forum shown by participants, the inter-organisational similarities and differences and the variety of ideas that have arisen by the process indicate that there is a future role for benchmarking in the field of widening access for mature students.

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SECTION III

Engagement and Participation



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5

MATURE STUDENTS AND COPING RESOURCES

Mary-Jo Appaqaq

Introduction

In the author's role as Employability and Progression Manager at Nelson College London, meetings occur almost on a daily basis with students who are overwhelmed with the demands of study, work, home life and maintaining a social life. This is evidenced not only in the academic performance of students but also in the withdrawal rate, and supported anecdotally in conversations with students.

Mature students are uniquely vulnerable because of the multitude of demands on them. This chapter introduces the concept of *resources* – which are personal, emotional, psychological, and material – as they relate to mature students undertaking tertiary education in the UK. As an extension of this the phenomenon of *resource loss* is identified. Further to this, the chapter identifies the phenomenon of *resource loss spirals* and deals with the description and analysis of (a) resources, (b) resource loss, and (c) resource loss spirals. The focus of this research was to establish the knowledge and application of resources in the population of Widening Access Mature Students (WAMS). The initial hypothesis was that many WAMS are unaware of this concept, could therefore be ill-equipped to withstand resource loss spirals, and risked not recognising the early warning signs of impending loss spirals. It is proposed that the ability of WAMS to adapt to changing or stressful circumstances will be positively impacted by equipping them with the knowledge of resources.

Students at Nelson College London, UK (NCL) were surveyed on their knowledge of psychological, emotional, personal, and material resources. They were asked if they had any prior understanding of the concept, how they

felt their decision to study impacted their resources, and which resource sets they felt were most positively and most negatively impacted before, during, and after returning to higher education (hereafter HE). Digital resources were introduced into the research as a key element of success or failure in adult HE because many students come from alternative backgrounds, such as other countries, with different educational paths, a vast range in age, and a wide variety of career paths.

COR Theory

Hobfoll first developed the theory of resources in his Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory describing the system whereby individuals are in a constant state of seeking to preserve resources while pursuing, acquiring, and developing new resources (1989). The original theory has since been applied by various scholars relating to fields such as exploring personal values, employment burn-out, public health, and nursing (Morelli & Cunningham, 2012; Bakker, Xanthopoulou, & Demerouti, 2022; Merino et al., 2021; Prapanjaroensin, Patrician, & Vance, 2017).

First, it is necessary to consider the resources available to mature students. Resources, as defined by the COR Theory can be quantified as (1) tangible objects, (2) psycho-social and environmental conditions, (3) valued psychological states or energies, and (4) malleable personal characteristics (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 5). These resources translate to *things* of value, a good environment or state of mind, feeling good about oneself, and possessing valuable personal characteristics, such as resilience, confidence, or flexibility.

Social connections are considered to be a resource set; however, it is not possible to fully allocate them to a category of their own, nor can they successfully be separated out of the other resource sets (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 5). For this study, social resources were included as a resource set, but it is important to bear in mind that social resources are deeply tied to other resource sets.

Material resources can be thought of as tangible or object resources (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 5). They are things that a person owns, or that they have. The car that they drive is a material resource, as are their clothes. The social aspect comes into play with the difference between owning something as a matter of necessity and owning something as a status symbol.

Conditional resources are those which relate to circumstances, such as a relationship status or employment (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 5). People invest resources to strengthen these circumstances, for example putting in extra time at work to secure a promotion or committing to regular date nights to accelerate a personal relationship from casual to exclusive. Further to that, a relationship may be developed by asking the person to cohabit. Marriage is seen as a social symbol of status and stability, as the value in it lies in how the wider community perceives it.

Psychological resources are seen as the amount of control a person has in their life and the feeling of having a strong purpose (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 5). A person with strong psychological resources will feel as though they are the master of their life and can make the majority of their own decisions. There are situations in life where people have a choice, but these can be limited through strong resources in other areas. For example, it is demanding to have a long commute to and from work every day. But a person who works in the centre of town and cannot afford to live nearby, or is unable to afford a car, will not have a choice but to spend the time and money commuting. Having strong material resources will help to prevent that person having to make a demanding commute. Equally, it might be more advantageous for a person to seek employment closer to home, in which case they would need strong conditional resources to get a job in a more competitive market with fewer jobs available.

Personal resources are those which directly relate to time and energy (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 5). For example, a person might want to spend their time developing their skills at work or taking evening classes to improve language skills. Practising self-care every evening to unwind after the day can also be a way to bolster personal resources. However, many people simply do not have the time to recuperate after periods of stress. They will undoubtedly find that a lack of recuperation will start to affect areas such as sleep, decision-making abilities, or mood. In turn, this could impact their other resources. If they are irritable at work, they might find themselves passed over for promotion. This can also impact personal relationships, friendships, and therefore the size of a person's social network.

According to Hobfoll's research, people feel stress during three distinct scenarios (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 4) These are:

- 1 When there is a *potential or perceived threat* to someone's resources
A basic example of this could be receiving an unfounded parking ticket. The person receiving the ticket knows they are in the right but are still being pursued for the fine. They would follow the correct procedure to fight the ticket, but in the meantime, would feel stress about the possibility of having to pay it.
- 2 When there is an *actual resource loss*
For example, if someone suffered a break-in and had valuable possessions stolen. These could be of monetary value, or sentimental value. Additionally, the person might not feel safe in their home, which the exact purpose of the home.
- 3 When someone has *invested resources*, and that investment has *not resulted in an overall resource gain*.
This is the stress-event that is most pertinent to mature students. If they have invested time, money, energy and social support into studying, and a qualification is not acquired, nor does a higher earning potential, this is an example of an investment of resources that does not result in an overall gain.

According to Van Rhijn et al., many of the concerns of returning students can be summed up into the following categories (2015):

- Role overload
 - Inability to manage the course workload in addition to other responsibilities in life
- Prolonged enrolment
 - Periods of absence, deferment, and inability to progress to advanced classes
- Lack of services and accommodation
- Doubting the benefit of HE
 - Liability for tuition fees if withdrawn from the course
 - Upset to personal life with no real gains
 - Incurring student debts
 - Failure to secure employment beyond education

According to COR Theory, it is necessary to conceptualise not only what an individual can gain by returning to education, for instance, but that they will not suffer a net loss of their hard-won resources. This is where the distinction between gaining resources and resource preservation can become blurred because prospective students will 'spend' resources to prevent resource loss (Hobfoll, 1989).

Loss Spirals

The following is a hypothetical case study of two different families who are both presented with round-the-clock caring responsibilities for a family member and consequential unemployment:

Family 1

Family 1 makes £150,000 a year, owns several properties, cars, and a healthy savings and investment plan. Due to the costs of maintaining the properties and the cars, and paying into the savings and investments, that family has £500 left over every month after all these costs, and the cost of living.

They immediately take stock of their liquifiable assets. They decide to sell a property, and a car, and pump the money from those sales into their investment portfolio. This, in turn, boosts their passive income, meaning they can take on the caring responsibilities and not have to worry about going back to

work yet. They also decide to stop paying into their savings for the time being, thereby freeing up more income.

Imagine this is also an older relative that they have to provide palliative care for. During the time that they are caring for them, while not having to focus on work, they can dedicate their time to making good memories with their loved one, giving their loved one a dignified life, and perhaps even come to terms with what will be the loss of a loved one.

When their caring responsibilities are over, after a period of rest, they are able to return to the workforce and eventually save enough money to buy back another property and car and carry on with life. From start to finish, the time frame for this is around two years. Indeed, it is a long and difficult two years, but from the start, they have a way through it. Perhaps, even their relationships are stronger bonds now than before this situation started because they were able to pull together and support each other through a difficult time. They didn't have to move their main residence, they were able to call on favours from friends and neighbours, and crucially, they were able to mentally process their losses and build them back in a timely manner.

Family 2

Imagine another family, one which makes £60,000 a year, is in rented accommodation with no car, and also has £500 left over every month after everything has been paid. This second family has a small amount of savings – say £6,000, and no investments. That £6,000 is the result of two years' saving and represents three months of costs if they scale back all non-essential spending. The relative they need to care for will not be well again in three months, so the clock is ticking to find permanent, alternative living arrangements that are extremely budget-friendly.

In order to really cut expenses, this family makes the difficult decision to move to a very cheap location in a smaller property, thereby extending their savings pot by a few weeks, even though the move was an added expense. They are below the savings threshold for receipt of benefits, so they immediately apply for Universal Credit. After an agonising wait, which is stressful and takes away a lot of time from their ability to care for the family member, they are handed a three-month lifeline – they have been approved for Universal Credit, but with the proviso that they find full time work (minimum of 32 hours a week) within 90 days, or face sanctions, or even their benefits being cut off.

Throughout this extra three months, they devise a rota whereby one parent is at home all the time, and one is working. These could be day shifts, evening shifts, or over-night shifts. But they will not be evicted, can care for their relative, and carry on with parental responsibilities.

After carrying on this way for a year, their mental health is suffering tremendously, as they must take over caring responsibilities and childcare rather than rest when they get home from work. Because they had to move, they no longer have the support of their friends – outside of intermittent phone calls, and because they have almost no free time, they have not managed to build up a support network in their new locale. The pressure is eventually too much for the relationship to bear, and they decide to divorce, but stay living together until the caring responsibilities are finished.

Once the caring responsibilities are finished, they must both move again, find new work, agree on custody arrangements, grieve the loss of a loved one, rebuild their lives after divorce, and, at the end of the tunnel, start saving money again. They do eventually start saving money, but their lives are never really the same again.

These case studies illustrate resource loss spirals. People who have weak resources are vulnerable to resource loss spirals. The people in the second family lost their social network, their relationship, their mental health suffered, their savings were obliterated, and it was necessary for them to relocate. They were not able to process the death of a loved one in a healthy way, or build positive lasting memories that would have helped them process the loss.

Because it is considered more detrimental to a person's psychological state to lose a resource than to gain a resource of the same magnitude the need to conserve personal resources can make people resistant to change, as the trade of a gain in something tangible for a knock in confidence is viewed as unequitable, and therefore unfavourable. Mature students will experience this barrier, this resistance to change, most acutely when initially embarking on a new educational journey.

Aims and Research Questions

This research applied survey methodology to answer the questions posed, further explore the themes and to suggest new areas of research. The aim of the survey was to show, through the experiences of WAMS, that their engagement/success or failure/burnout in HE does not occur in a vacuum. It is suggested that targeted support for each resource set will improve academic achievement. This has already been established in traditional college-age students (Alarcon, Edwards, & Menke, 2011). The aim was therefore to delve further into the

causes of burnout and failure, and how institutions which specialise in educating mature students from widening access backgrounds can support WAMS through these difficulties. The following research questions were posed:

- 1 What is the general awareness of this population of WAMS with respect to coping resources?
- 2 In the context of WAMS in HE, should digital resources be considered a resource set?
- 3 What is the appetite for WAMS to learn more about coping resources and digital resources?

Methodology

Participants

An online survey was developed to gather data from the following populations:

- Potential or future mature students at NCL; those who had investigated studying as a mature student, or those who would be open to studying as a mature student
- Current mature students
- Alumni
- Students who started a course and withdrew or were withdrawn; are taking an intermission of study; are considering taking an intermission of study

Respondents who selected that they had no interest in studying as a mature student or were not yet old enough to be a mature student were filtered to the end of the form. Students' contact details were accessed from NCL's internal database, and ethics approval was sought to ensure all safeguarding measures were in place.

Survey Instrument

Survey questions were designed to elicit responses on resources as a whole as opposed to each resource set (psychological, personal, tangible, conditional, and social) individually, with an emphasis on the types of support that could directly benefit students. 'Resources' is a challenging topic to define in a short survey, and as the focus was on the way in which WAMS cope with stress during studying, resources were defined as 'coping resources'. This is a variation on Hobfoll's term, with a view to keep participants focussed on how they categorise their stress levels before, during, and after returning to HE and the ways in which HE institutions can prevent students from failing or burning out.

The survey comprised a total of 20 questions per branch, of which there were four, and structured into two sections. The survey was presented on the Microsoft Forms platform. Students were initially asked about their status as a mature student. There was a possibility that some participants were not yet old enough to be considered mature students. The study intended to focus solely on current mature students, future mature students (those enrolled but who have not started yet), or those at mature student age who were considering returning to HE. This was the first question asked as it was a branching and filtering question.

The Full Questionnaire Is Located in Appendix 1

Survey Dissemination Methods

Initially, an invitation to complete the survey with the link embedded was sent to all current NCL students, via the NCL bulk emailing platform. Further to this, a personal and carefully worded invitation was sent to all students who had recently been withdrawn or self-withdrawn from any course with NCL. Additionally, a QR code was generated for the survey and a large A1 poster was designed to display in all three campuses. The same QR code was used in a handout form and given to lecturers to distribute in classes. Finally, at functions such as inductions and the annual employability forum, the QR code was displayed with a short explanation of the survey.

Respondents were informed that they had the right to withdraw their consent to complete the survey up until they submitted their responses, but because of the anonymity of the survey, they would be unable to withdraw their responses after submitting. As an incentive, respondents were invited to submit their email address to be included in a raffle for a £50 Amazon gift card. Respondents were informed that this information would be stored separately from their survey data and would therefore not be attributed to their individual responses.

Demographic Questions

The purpose of these demographic questions was to establish, in a broad sense, the resource baseline of participants. For example, it would be understood that a single person under the age of 35 with two child dependents, caring responsibilities, and no educational qualifications, could be acutely vulnerable to resource loss spirals.

- 1 How would you describe your gender or gender identity?
- 2 Please select your age range.
- 3 Please indicate your marital/relationship status.
- 4 How many children under the age of 18 live with you on at least a part-time basis?

- 5 Are you a carer?
- 6 What is your highest level of education?

Previous Education Questions

Respondents were then asked if they attended HE between the ages of 18 and 21, and whether it was mostly a negative or positive experience for them, and about their awareness of ‘coping resources’. This was a closed question with no further explanation given at this stage.

In the following question, each resource set was then very briefly explained in two short sentences. The definitions were as follows:

Personal resources: your ability to self-manage, your time, energy, and attention. For example, skills at work can be developed, family/children can be given attention or energy can be restored through self-care.

Conditional resources: resources directly related to a situation or circumstances, such as intimate relationships, employment or reputation within the community (online or in-person).

Social resources: the size of a social network, the support available, and the ability to expand a network. This could include how often friends/extended family are seen, the help this offers an individual, and the ability to reach out to people outside of a network.

Tangible resources: the things possessed such as money, qualifications, or property including salary/savings, the home lived in, or the car driven.

Psychological resources: a view of life, having control over life, and having a strong purpose in life. Feeling positive about the future, making own decisions, or knowing what is wanted in life are ways to describe having strong psychological resources.

Quantitative Questions

Over the next three questions, respondents were asked to evaluate how their overall resources were affected (or how they could be affected), which were (or could) be most negatively affected, and which were (or could) be most positively affected during HE.

Digital resources were then examined separately over three questions, gathering data on the strength and reliability of the students’ home internet connection, number of devices with the ability to connect to the internet, and the students’ confidence in operating these devices.

In a qualifying question, respondents were asked to describe how they thought their coping resources and digital resources have affected their decision to (i) start an HE course, (ii) withdraw from a course, (iii) take an intermission of study, and (iv) consider taking an intermission of study.

Finally, students were given a menu of hypothetical support options and asked to select as many as they thought could be of use to them, personally, during an HE course. The itemised options were:

- A one-off workshop on coping resources
- A one-off workshop on digital resources
- A semester-long module on coping resources
- A semester-long module on digital resources
- Assessments (not related to entry criteria) on coping or digital resources
- A personalised plan to develop coping or digital resources
- More financial aid allocations (travel, expenses, childcare, hardship)
- Peer support groups
- Access to a guidance counsellor or talking therapy
- Fully remote learning
- Fully in-class learning
- Hybrid learning (mix of remote and in-class)
- Recorded lectures
- Open book tests/exams
- No tests/exams (coursework only)
- No coursework (tests/exams only)
- Free career advice for students and alumni
- Free financial advice for students and alumni
- OTHER:

Results

Of the over 2,000 people whom the survey was sent to, 35 responses were gathered. With a response rate of less than 2%, this was the first unanticipated challenge of collecting data in this population that arose. Of those respondents, six were considering or had investigated studying as a mature student, 21 were currently studying as a mature student, six had studied and finished the course, one was considering taking an intermission of study, and one respondent was not yet old enough to be a mature student. Due to the perceived associations with failure, loss, and stigma, this group can be considered a very hard-to-reach group for empirical research.

Demographic Profile

Not all respondents answered all the demographic questions. A total of 28 respondents were either married/civil partnership or living with a partner, versus 4 who reported being single. A total of 15 respondents had no children, whereas 18 respondents had 1–3 children living with them on at least a part-time basis. 13 respondents reported having caring responsibilities, and 18 respondents reported not having caring responsibilities.

Education Experience and Prior Knowledge of Concepts

Three respondents reported having no formal qualifications, four had GCSE or equivalent, two had A-levels or equivalent, 11 had a Certificate, Diploma or Technical Qualification, six had some college or university education without formally finishing, two had an undergraduate degree, and one had a postgraduate degree. A total of 19 respondents reported having studied in post-secondary education between the ages of 18–21 and that it was a mostly positive experience, and one respondent said that it was a mostly negative experience. Five respondents did not study in this time frame but wished they had and six said that it was not right time for them to have studied.

A total of 22 respondents reported being aware of the concept of ‘coping resources’, whereas 11 respondents reported not being previously aware of the concept.

Resources Questions

Overall, how do you think your coping resources could have been/were affected during higher education?

<i>Option</i>	<i>Number</i>
Very negative effect on coping resources	5
Slightly negative effect on coping resources	9
Slightly enhanced coping resources	13
Extremely enhanced coping resources	7

Which resource set do you think would have been/was most negatively affected during higher education?

<i>Option</i>	<i>Number</i>
Personal (your ability to self-manage, your time, energy, and attention)	13
Conditional (resources directly related to your situation or circumstances)	6
Social (the size of your social network, the support available to you, and your ability to expand your network)	4
Tangible (the things you have such as money, qualifications, or property)	9
Psychological (your view on life, having control over your life, and having a strong sense of purpose in life)	2

Which resource set do you think would be/have been/was most positively affected during higher education?

<i>Option</i>	<i>Number</i>
Personal (your ability to self-manage, your time, energy, and attention)	18
Conditional (resources directly related to your situation or circumstances)	3
Social (the size of your social network, the support available to you and your ability to expand your network)	5
Tangible (the things you have such as money, qualifications or property)	1
Psychological (your view on life, having control over your life, and having a strong sense of purpose in life)	7

Most (31) respondents reported having an internet connection that is usually reliable/reasonably fast, or superfast/fibre optic. A total of 12 respondents reported owning 1 device with internet capability, and 22 respondents reported owning two or more devices with internet capability. Most (30) respondents reported being somewhat confident or extremely confident in accessing the internet, three were somewhat not confident, and one was extremely not confident.

Please Indicate Which Avenues, Outside of Academic Support, Could Be of Use to You, Personally, during a Higher Education Course. Please Select as Many Boxes as Apply.

**Please note, these are hypothetical examples and should not be presumed as future practices for your institution*

<i>Option</i>	<i>Number</i>
A one-off workshop on coping resources	10
A one-off workshop on digital resources	9
A semester-long module on coping resources	3
A semester-long module on digital resources	4
Assessments (not related to entry criteria) on coping or digital resources	2
A personalised plan to develop your coping or digital resources	7
More financial aid allocations, i.e. travel, expenses, childcare, hardship	8
Peer support groups	2

<i>Option</i>	<i>Number</i>
Access to a guidance counsellor or talking therapy	3
Fully remote learning	7
Fully in-class learning	7
Hybrid learning (mix of remote and in-class)	8
Recorded lectures	1
Open book tests/exams	4
No tests/exams, i.e. coursework only	1
No coursework, i.e. tests/exams only	0
Free career advice for students and alumni	5
Free financial advice for students and alumni	3
Other	0

Discussion

The questions driving this study were what is most important to the overall success of a widening access mature student. Can we develop a way of identifying when a student is at risk of becoming overwhelmed and withdrawing from HE? Unfortunately, we were unable to gather responses from former students who had withdrawn or been withdrawn, despite a lot of effort to reach out to them.

The study does indicate that there is an appetite for learning about coping resources and indeed digital resources within the student population. Many students indicated they possessed good resources through the demographics questions – being in a relationship and having undertaken prior education, though many also indicated that they had a lot of demand on their resources in the form of dependents and having caring responsibilities. It is an interesting anomaly that personal resources were rated as the top resource set that could be most positively and also most negatively affected during a course of study. Exploration of this anomaly should be identified as a future topic of study.

In most cases, the reason mature students want to study is to either gain a promotion at work or to instigate a lateral career move. The second represents a significant and expensive risk, and the temptation is to ‘stay put’. However, being in a state of inaction can be as draining, mentally and emotionally, and ultimately lead to a state of regret (Tykocinski & Pittman, 1998).

In this study, digital resources were included because the ultimate goal is to drive the success of students. When considering students of a diverse background, education level and education quality, provenance, age, and cultures, it is important to remember that there will be a spectrum of digital resources available to them. Of particular importance in this resource set are the

‘unknown unknowns’ – those things which people do not know about because they are unaware of them entirely – especially when dealing with such a diverse set of adult learners. Many students assessed themselves in the survey as having strong digital resources, but the evidence and lived experience of staff contradicts that assessment. It is possible that the subset of students who decided to undertake the survey did have strong digital skills, as the invitation was sent via email and the survey was available exclusively online. As previously mentioned, perceived digital resources versus actual digital resources can be further examined in future research because students need to be aware of what they are lacking in digital resources in order to succeed as it is within digital resources that adult learning can thrive. Developing strong digital resources and skills enables adult students to take greater control of their learning, and so, maximise their academic outcomes (Lawson, 2005).

For the purpose of this study, students were asked about their perceived digital skills in contrast to their actual digital skills. This lacuna has been identified as a theme for further exploration with a hypothesis that this difference between perceived and actual skills is widest in the context of digital skills as a coping resource, with the difference most stark when thinking about digital resources.

To apply this learning and protect students from loss spirals it is necessary to educate students not only in the field of their choice, but also on resources, and the true nature of adaptability. This conclusion is based on feedback from the survey and supporting research in the field, such as Malcolm Knowles’ theory of andragogy, which states that one of the prime motivations of adult students is centred on gaining the ability to cope with real-life situations (Knowles, 1980). Adult learners are not motivated merely to ‘complete the modules’, in the way the conventional college-age students are. Adult learners want to know how the course will benefit their lives outside of the learning environment and, indeed, beyond college life. There is an interest in developing critical thinking skills swiftly, and successfully adapting to change, identifying challenges and problem solving.

The author is reminded of a situation in which two NCL students were interested in pursuing careers in digital marketing. Placements were set for them with a digital marketing agency, but during the check-ins with the employer, the Work-Based Learning Officer was informed that the employer had spent a lot of time instructing the students on how to use a keyboard, attach documents and access data from spreadsheets. Both students had assessed their digital skills (separately to this study) as either confident or very confident – skills which are essential to succeeding in this particular field. Both students took it upon themselves to independently learn more about the digital skills required for their prospective fields of employment as a result of this experience.

Returning to the theme of demands in the life of a mature student, it must be noted that they are particularly vulnerable to resource loss because they

have taken on student debt, they have invested a lot of time into studies, sacrificing working time and therefore money, as well as time with their families. The toll this can take on a mature student's psychological resources, which are arguably the last defence against total loss, is great. If the student decides to withdraw from the course, they will have invested a great deal of time, money, energy, and, indeed, hope, and will not have had the resource payout they were expecting. This is one of the principles of COR theory, that stress is felt if an individual invests significant resources in the hope of gaining resources and that investment does not pay off. Loss spirals (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 7) occur when a person experiences resource loss as a result of a preceding resource loss, and the cycle continues until the person's resources are either completely depleted or very nearly depleted. Mature students differ in many ways from conventional-aged students. Namely, the setup of their lives is axiomatically different and the way in which they optimally learn is different (Stoten, 2015). Few mature students have the luxury of being able to exclusively focus on study, which is what conventional-aged students are actively encouraged to do.

So, how can mature students be protected from resource loss, resource loss spirals, and psychological harm? If this can be addressed, students can become more adaptable, understanding stress triggers, recognising threats to stability, and even identifying situations in the past where they may have been able to do something different to achieve a more favourable outcome. The environment and support provided to a mature student should be different to the environment and support that is provided to young adults, particularly if they haven't been in any form of education for a long time, or if their education was in a very different setting.

Mature students, or perhaps more crucially, an adult who is considering returning to education, but has not yet committed to it, can envision a possible version of themselves, (Markus & Nurius, 1986) but may be unwilling to risk a depletion in personal resources to attain that possible self. The theory of possible selves, in which a person conceptualises their potential (both in a positive light and a negative light), is relevant when thinking about ways to motivate students to break through the barrier of the perceived risk. Evaluating coping resources and developing a positive mindset for embracing life changes underpin these concepts in a measurable way (Hammer, 2019). Finally, a robust social support network outside of the classroom, with a flexible system that is built on trust, will further the students' perceptions that HE institutions can provide a continually improving system of support.

Application of Findings to NCL

It will be possible to use the survey data to design in-person (workshops, lectures, short courses) and published materials (short guides, articles, further research) for delivery to mature students at NCL in order to:

82 Exploring Widening Access for Mature Age Students

- a Promote awareness of coping resources
- b Inform students of the importance of coping resources as a mature student
- c Encourage students to assess their current baseline coping resources
- d Identify areas of concern within students' coping resources
- e Counsel students on making changes to improve coping resources
- f Establish a framework to maintain strong coping resources beyond college life

As the last action suggests, the final point of implementation will be to show that having an awareness of coping resources and having the ability to assess them on a regular basis will better equip WAMS for future career progression and stress management. External stressors affect a student's overall life. Recognising these stressors and helping students to mitigate them could have a positive effect not only on WAMS academic performance, but on their overall lifelong achievements. Each resource set may also be explored in more detail in further research, breaking down the sets into their granular components.

HE is not a one-size-fits-all experience, neither is the adaptation to the transition to HE a one-size-fits-all experience for all students. It follows that the support available to assist students with this life change should cover a range of concerns. Students entering HE immediately from secondary school are typically immersed in the campus mentality and lifestyle, with many adopting it as part of their identity. These are formative years for a young person primarily due to their age and lack of life experience. The mentality of a WAMS student can be quite different, and as such, the support that is available for their successful adjustment should be quite different. By addressing adjustment concerns that prospective students have before the time of application, HE institutions will be able to attract potential returning students who might not consider HE a viable option. Even further along, if a student is not aware of the support that is available to them once they have started studying, and need it, this may result in unnecessary course withdrawals, either imposed by the HE facility or self-imposed by the student to limit further perceived losses of resources. Based on this survey research, a possible avenue for future study could be to explore whether knowledge of coping resources, and the risks of coping resource loss spirals does impact the adaptability of mature students to changing or stressful circumstances.

Resource losses are felt more greatly than a resource gain of the same magnitude (Hobfoll, 1989). Similarly, if a person has a strongly desired goal and are confronted with the realisation that this goal will not be achieved, they can go through a period of grieving for the future they had envisioned for themselves. This is known as the primacy of resource loss.

There is some trust in the adage that capital generates capital and illustrates a particular principle of COR Theory. People will invest resources (for

example time, money, emotions) to protect themselves against losses, recover from losses suffered, and to gain resources. This is the second principle of the COR Theory – resource investment.

Conclusions and Further Research

Students were surveyed on the subject of resources and digital resources and the results indicated that adult students are keen to learn about coping resources. The most popular of these options was a one-off workshop on coping resources. This will be developed and delivered by the Employability and Progression Department at NCL, from within the Career Advisory Service. Students who take this workshop can opt to be tracked and report back on how they use the information delivered in the workshop in their daily, weekly, and monthly lives.

Because of the low response rate of the survey, further study will be needed to investigate the types of support that would most benefit students. A future study could examine in more detail the demographics of the population, which outline a lot of the coping resources themselves. Employment, relationship status, income, dependents, and home ownership are aspects of a student's life that can be analysed in detail to determine the baseline strength of their coping resources. Future studies in this direction will therefore have greater challenges regarding ethical approval, and will deal with more sensitive information in order to dig deeper into the issues that can contribute to the academic success or course withdrawal of WAMS. Additionally, each individual resource set could be studied in detail separately, with the same students.

The use of individual interviews as a data collection method may help to overcome the technological barrier that some students may experience, and therefore would not have participated in the original survey. These steps will help to ensure that enough awareness is raised on the subject of coping resources within the student body and that WAMS are better equipped to handle future challenges beyond college life.

A considerable number of personal resources will be gained during a course of further and HE. The qualification gained at the end of a course is a tangible resource, as well as large pieces of coursework leading up to that, particularly in the case of a research assignment or dissertation. It should be clearly demonstrated from an early stage that in joining the student body, students will automatically be accessing a range of favourable psycho-social and environmental conditions. These exist in the form of student engagement activities, curricular workshops and fieldtrips, college-sponsored events, study groups, on-campus facilities, and a flexible approach to enrolment. When it comes to searching for a new job to improve conditional resources, institutions can deploy their career advisory departments to show that mature students can be supported through

that final transition. Students will have greater control over their economic mobility – thus positively affecting their psychological resources.

Demonstrating to mature students the support available to them to avoid these concerns, and therefore avoid a loss of personal resources, will mean that they are able to fully appreciate the personal resource gains that they will make within HE. This would mainly be achieved through the academic support staff, study groups, extension periods, ad-hoc one-to-one lecturer support, as well as financial support such as hardship funds, extra grants or bursaries, career advisory services, and support with student finance applications. These are largely services that already exist in many HE facilities but creating more awareness around their existence at the point of interest will address the negative feelings associated with applying for an HE course.

Appendix

Survey for Mature Students

Information and Consent

1 *Information about the survey*

Information provided

Please be aware that there are subjects in this survey that may raise strong emotions or bring back memories of stressful situations. Please prioritise your well-being if you feel unable to complete the survey.

Consent question provided

2 *A mature student is over the age of 21 when either returning to higher education or starting out in higher education for the first time. Which of these options best describes you regarding higher education? If more than one option is relevant, select the one that is most recent.*

- a I've thought about/investigated studying as a mature student, but have never done it
- b I've never investigated studying as a mature student, but would be open to it
- c I'm currently studying as a mature student
- d I've studied as a mature student and finished the course
- e I've previously studied as a mature student but did not finish the course
- f I've taken or I'm considering taking an intermission of study for a course as a mature student and will return in the next 12 months
- g I have no interest in studying as a mature student
- h I'm not yet old enough to be a mature student

Survey Branches 1/2/3/4

- 3 *How would you describe your gender or gender identity?*
- a Woman
 - b Man
 - c Prefer not to say
 - d Other
- 4 *Please select your age range/select your age range at the time you were a mature student.*
- a 21–35
 - b 36–50
 - c 51–65
 - d 66+
 - e Prefer not to say
- 5 *Please indicate your marital/relationship status:*
- a Married/Civil Partnership
 - b Single/Never married
 - c Divorced/Separated
 - d Widowed
 - e Engaged
 - f Cohabiting/Living with partner
 - g Prefer not to say
 - h Other
- 6 *How many children under the age of 18 live with you/lived with you on at least a part-time basis?*
- a None
 - b 1
 - c 2
 - d 3
 - e 4 or more
 - f Prefer not to say
- 7 *Are/Were you a carer?*
- a Yes
 - b No
 - c Prefer not to say
- 8 *What is your highest level of education?*
- a No formal qualifications
 - b GCSE or equivalent
 - c A-levels or equivalent
 - d Certificate, Diploma or Technical Qualification
 - e Some college or university, without formally finishing the qualification

- f Undergraduate Degree
 - g Postgraduate Degree
 - h Doctorate
 - i Prefer not to say
- 9 *Did you study in higher education (whether you completed the course or not) between the ages of 18 and 21? Which of these answers is the closest to your experience?*
- a Yes – and it was mostly a positive experience
 - b Yes – and it was mostly a negative experience
 - c No – but I wish I had
 - d No – it was not the right time for me
 - e Other
- 10 *Are you aware of the concept of “coping resources” – for example, personal, conditional, social, tangible and psychological?*
- a Yes
 - b No
- 11 *Below are some brief definitions of coping resources. Please read them carefully before proceeding.*

Personal resources: your ability to self-manage, your time, energy, and attention. For example, you can develop your skills at work, give your family/children attention, or restore your energy through self-care.

Conditional resources: resources directly related to your situation or circumstances, such as intimate relationships, employment, or reputation within your community (online or in-person).

Social resources: the size of your social network, the support available to you and your ability to expand your network. This could include how often you see close friends/extended family, the help they can offer you, and your ability to reach out to people outside of your network.

Tangible resources: the things you have such as money, qualifications, or property such as your salary/savings, the home you live in, or the car you drive.

Psychological resources: your view of life, having control over your life, and having a strong purpose in life. Feeling positive about the future, making your own decisions, or knowing what you want to do in life are ways to describe having strong psychological resources.

** You can scroll back up to re-read these definitions if necessary for the next few questions. **

(tick box – OK)

- 12 *Overall, how do you think your coping resources could have been/were affected during higher education? **
- a Very negative effect on coping resources
 - b Slightly negative effect on coping resources

- c Slightly enhanced coping resources
 - d. Extremely enhanced coping resources
- 13 *Which resource set do you think would be/have been most negatively affected during higher education? **
- a Personal (your ability to self-manage, your time, energy, and attention)
 - b Conditional (resources directly related to your situation or circumstances)
 - c Social (the size of your social network, the support available to you, and your ability to expand your network)
 - d Tangible (the things you have such as money, qualifications, or property)
 - e Psychological (your view of life, having control over your life, and having a strong purpose in life)
- 14 *Which resource set do you think would be/have been most positively affected during higher education? **
- a Personal (your ability to self-manage, your time, energy, and attention)
 - b Conditional (resources directly related to your situation or circumstances)
 - c Social (the size of your social network, the support available to you, and your ability to expand your network)
 - d Tangible (the things you have such as money, qualifications, or property)
 - e Psychological (your view of life, having control over your life, and having a strong purpose in life)
- 15 *Digital resources are defined as your access to an internet connection, the devices you own that can connect to the internet and your ability to operate these devices. Strong digital resources include having an internet connection at home, 2 devices that can connect to the internet, and being able to fully operate these devices. Which statement below most accurately describes your home internet connection/described your home internet connection at the time of your studies? **
- a I don't have internet at home
 - b I have internet at home, but it is unreliable or slow
 - c My home internet connection is usually reliable and reasonably fast
 - d I have super-fast or fibre optic broadband and the connection very rarely drops
- 16 *How many devices in your household have/had the capability to connect to the internet? If you are unsure, your best guess is fine. **
- a None
 - b 1
 - c 2 or more

- 17 *How confident are/were you in using devices to access the internet? **
- a Extremely not confident
 - b Somewhat not confident
 - c Somewhat confident
 - d Extremely confident
- 18 *Please explain in your own words, if or how you think your coping resources and digital resources have affected your decision whether or not to start a higher education course/take an intermission of study. Please be as detailed as possible. * (long text answer)*
- 19 *Please indicate which avenues, outside of academic support, could be of use to you, personally, during a higher education course. Please select as many boxes as apply.*

**Please note, these are hypothetical examples and should not be presumed as future practices for your institution. **

- a A one-off workshop on coping resources
 - b A one-off workshop on digital resources
 - c A semester-long module on coping resources
 - d A semester-long module on digital resources
 - e Assessments (not related to entry criteria) on coping or digital resources
 - f A personalised plan to develop your coping or digital resources
 - g More financial aid allocations ie travel, expenses, childcare, hardship
 - h Peer support groups
 - i Access to a guidance counsellor or talking therapy
 - j Fully remote learning
 - k Fully in-class learning
 - l Hybrid learning (mix of remote and in-class)
 - m Recorded lectures
 - n Open book tests/exams
 - o No tests/exams, i.e.coursework only
 - p No coursework, i.e.tests/exams only
 - q Free career advice for students and alumni
 - r Free financial advice for students and alumni
 - s Other
20. *If you would like to be included in the prize draw for a £50 Amazon voucher, please provide*

your email address. Please be aware that this information will be stored separately from your survey responses.

Survey Branch 4 only

- 67 *What part did coping resources play in your decision to take an intermission of study or leave higher education? **

- a Very small
- b Somewhat
- c Significant
- d Deciding factor

75 *Where there any extenuating circumstances outside your control that affected your decision to discontinue your studies/take an intermission of study/consider taking and intermission of study? If so, in which area of your life did these events occur? **

- a Immediate family
- b Extended family
- c Personal illness
- d Housing situation
- e Mental illness
- f Bereavement
- g Job loss
- h Financial situation
- i Childcare issues
- j Unexpected caring responsibilities
- k Not applicable
- l Prefer not to say
- m Other

76 *Would you be willing to take part in a follow-up call to help us get more information on how mature students' coping resources affect their decisions? This will involve giving a phone number for the lead on this project to arrange a follow-up call with further questions. We would like to remind you that you are under no obligation to assist with a case study, it is entirely voluntary. **

77 (if the respondent agreed to participate) *Thank you for agreeing to participate in a follow-up call for a more in-depth case study, your participation is greatly appreciated. Please can you provide your phone number for the lead in this project to contact you.*

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6

MATURE LEARNERS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

A Perspective from University of Jos, Nigeria

Naandye Dabugat

Introduction

Widening access to higher education (HE) for mature students is a crucial aspect of contemporary educational policy, aimed at enhancing social equity and fostering lifelong learning. Mature learners, typically defined as individuals aged 21 or older who return to education after a break, face unique challenges and opportunities in HE. In Nigeria, HE has historically been tailored towards younger, traditional students who progress directly from secondary school into university. However, in recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the need to accommodate mature learners, who bring valuable life experiences and practical skills to academic environments (Adebayo and Olayemi, 2020) enriching the educational environment for both them and younger students. Mature students in Nigeria often face significant barriers, including financial constraints, balancing work or family responsibilities, and adapting to modern educational technologies. The University of Jos, one of Nigeria's prominent universities, has made strides in addressing these challenges through flexible learning options, such as part-time and distance learning programmes. These initiatives aim to create a more inclusive environment for mature learners, allowing them to pursue HE without the traditional constraints of full-time attendance (Sulaimon and Ibrahim, 2021).

Despite these efforts, the University of Jos, like many Nigerian institutions, faces challenges in providing sufficient support for mature students. Academic advising, counselling services, and mentorship tailored to the needs of mature learners remain areas of concern (Aina and Adamu, 2020). Mature students often require additional academic support, particularly those who have been away from formal education for an extended period. The university's current

programmes have made some progress in offering greater flexibility, but improvements in financial aid and institutional support are still needed to ensure that mature learners are adequately supported. In addition to addressing academic challenges, fostering a more inclusive campus culture is vital. Many mature students find it difficult to integrate into the university community, where the majority of students are younger. The University of Jos can play a role in bridging this gap by offering mentorship programmes that pair mature students with faculty or younger students who can provide guidance and support.

The Role of Annual Leave on Widening Access for Mature Students in Higher Education in Nigeria

HE in Nigeria has become an essential means of social mobility, economic development, and personal empowerment. However, access to tertiary education remains uneven, particularly for those who enter HE later in life. These students often face unique challenges, including balancing work, family responsibilities, and academic obligations. In this context, policies like annual leave can play a critical role in widening access to HE, enabling mature students who are in salaried employment to manage these competing demands effectively. Annual leave, which is the paid time off granted by employers to employees for rest and recuperation, can be a key factor in facilitating the academic success of mature students. This section explores the impact of annual leave on widening access to HE for mature students in Nigeria. It examines how access to paid leave helps to reduce the barriers that mature students face in balancing work and study, as well as the potential role of employers and educational institutions in supporting these students. Additionally, it addresses the challenges that arise when access to annual leave is limited and how this affects mature students' ability to engage fully in HE.

Balancing Work and Study

One of the greatest challenges that mature students face in Nigeria is the need to balance their academic studies with their professional responsibilities. Many mature students are employed full time; taking time off to attend classes or prepare for examinations can be difficult without the ability to take leave from work. In such cases, access to annual leave becomes essential, as it provides paid time off that allows students to attend classes, complete assignments and prepare for examinations without the financial stress of losing income. In Nigeria, the standard annual leave duration for public sector employees is usually between 30 and 42 days per year, depending on the level of employment (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2021). For private sector employees, the leave duration can vary, with larger corporations offering more generous leave

benefits compared to smaller enterprises. For mature students, particularly those employed in full-time positions, having access to annual leave can significantly reduce the conflict between work and study.

Reducing Financial Stress

In addition to offering time away from work, annual leave also reduces the financial burden that mature students may face when trying to balance their education with professional obligations. Without access to paid leave, mature students may have to take unpaid leave or make the difficult decision to forgo academic commitments in favour of maintaining their income. This can lead to delayed graduation, reduced academic performance, or, in the worst cases, the abandonment of studies altogether. Moreover, mature students often face additional financial pressures, including family responsibilities and the cost of tuition. The ability to take paid time off from work alleviates some of these pressures, as it allows students to focus on their education without the immediate concern of losing wages or falling behind in their jobs. This support is particularly crucial for female mature students, who are often the primary caregivers in Nigerian households (Alabi, 2021). When they are able to access paid leave, they can more effectively balance domestic responsibilities with their academic commitments.

Fostering Lifelong Learning

The ability to access annual leave encourages mature students to engage in lifelong learning. Nigeria has a remarkably young population compared to most other countries. The median age in Nigeria is approximately 18 years (UN, 2022), significantly lower than the global median age of around 30 years. This demographic reality means that a substantial portion of the Nigerian population is currently in their youth and will continue to enter the workforce in the coming years. This rising population presents both opportunities and challenges. One of the major implications is the increasing need for lifelong learning initiatives. As these young people progress through their careers, they will require continuous upskilling and reskilling to remain competitive in a rapidly evolving job market. This necessitates a shift towards educational models that cater to diverse age groups and learning needs, including mature learners who may be returning to education after a period of work or family responsibilities. Providing access to annual leave for students pursuing HE supports this goal by enabling them to take the necessary time off to focus on their studies without disrupting their professional trajectory. For mature students who have already established careers, annual leave can also facilitate career advancement through education. By gaining new qualifications and skills, mature students can improve their job prospects, increase their earning

potential, and contribute more effectively to their communities. Therefore, policies that allow employees to take leave for educational purposes can play a role in promoting both individual development and national progress.

Challenges Faced by Mature Students Without Access to Annual Leave Increased Work-Study Conflict

For many mature students in Nigeria, access to annual leave is not guaranteed, particularly in the private sector or informal employment. Without access to paid leave, mature students face heightened work-study conflict. When employers do not provide sufficient leave, students are forced to either sacrifice work hours to attend classes or skip academic obligations to meet professional responsibilities. This conflict often leads to stress, burnout, and academic underperformance. In addition, some employers may not be willing to grant leave for educational purposes, viewing it as a disruption to business operations. In these cases, mature students are left with limited options: either continue working without taking time off or risk losing their employment by taking time off to study. This lack of access to leave further exacerbates the difficulties faced by mature students, particularly those who are self-financing their education or have families to support.

Limited Access in the Informal Sector

A significant portion of Nigeria's workforce is employed in the informal sector. The informal sector is a significant contributor to the national economy, providing livelihoods for a substantial portion of the population, particularly in the face of limited formal employment opportunities. It encompasses a wide range of activities, from street vending and small-scale trading to artisanal crafts, transportation services (like motorcycle taxis) and agricultural labour. While precise figures are challenging to obtain due to the sector's nature, estimates suggest that the informal economy accounts for a significant portion of Nigeria's GDP and employs a large percentage of the workforce (ILO, 2018). For instance, some studies have indicated that the informal sector could represent between 40 and 70% of the national GDP (ACIOE, 2025). This sector is characterised by small-scale enterprises, often family-run, with limited access to formal credit, social protection, and legal frameworks. Workers in the informal sector often face unstable working conditions, low and irregular incomes and a lack of job security (NBS, 2023). Despite these challenges, the informal sector plays a crucial role in absorbing a large pool of unskilled and semi-skilled labour, particularly among youth and women, and contributes significantly to household incomes and poverty reduction. For mature students working in informal or self-employment settings, the lack of

paid leave presents a major obstacle to accessing HE. In these cases, students must rely on their own resources to take time off work, which can be financially unfeasible.

Recommendations on Leave Strengthening Employer-Supported Education Policies

To support mature students, Nigerian employers, particularly in the private sector, should be encouraged to adopt policies that facilitate access to paid annual leave for educational purposes. These policies could include flexible work hours, paid study leave, or additional leave days specifically for educational advancement. Public sector employers could lead by example by ensuring that annual leave is expressly approved for employees pursuing HE and encouraging lifelong learning. The Nigerian Education Loan Fund (NELFUND) established via the Student Loans (Access to Higher Education) Act 2024, signed into law on 03 April 2024, is a step in the right direction and commendable indeed (Statehouse.gov.ng, 2024). While it provides access to student loans, it fails to address the issue of permission for employees to go on study leave.

Collaboration Between Employers and Educational Institutions

Collaboration between universities and employers can create a more supportive environment for mature students. Educational institutions could work with employers to develop flexible learning schedules that align with the professional obligations of mature students. Additionally, universities could offer programmes specifically designed for working adults, such as evening classes or online courses, which would allow students to continue their education without sacrificing their careers.

Expanding Access for Informal Sector Workers

Policies should also be designed to expand access to annual leave for workers in the informal sector, where paid leave is often unavailable. One possible approach is for government to enact programmes that will give incentives to businesses and individuals in the informal sector through their various associations to sponsor those that would be interested in learning new ways of improving their businesses through HE. The associations will then serve as the connection between the individuals and the government for monitoring. Additionally, universities could develop more affordable and accessible programmes for self-employed individuals, ensuring that these students are not excluded from opportunities for HE.

Industrial or Strike Action in Higher Education Institutions and Widening Access for Mature Students in Higher Education in Nigeria

Industrial or strike action in Nigerian HE institutions has become a recurrent issue, with profound implications for the overall functioning of the education system. These strikes are often triggered by disagreements between university unions and the government regarding issues such as poor funding, inadequate working conditions, and salary discrepancies. While these strikes primarily affect the academic staff and their working conditions, they also have far-reaching consequences for students, and especially mature students, who may face unique challenges in completing their education. In the case of the University of Jos, located in Plateau State, Nigeria, as well as other universities across the country, academic strikes have disrupted academic calendars, delayed graduation timelines, and put additional stress on students. For mature students, because of the late return to the university after a significant time away from formal education, balancing work, family and other personal responsibilities are particularly problematic. This section explores the effects of academic industrial or strike action on widening access for mature students in HE in Nigeria, with a particular focus on the University of Jos.

Academic Strikes in Nigerian Universities

The four most significant unions involved in strike actions are the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), the Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU), the Non-Academic Staff Union of Universities (NASU) and the National Association of Academic Technologists (NAAT), whose members include lecturers, administrative staff, junior support workers and academic technologists in the sciences respectively. The strikes can last for weeks or even months, disrupting academic schedules and leading to prolonged delays in the academic calendar. For instance, the ASUU strike that occurred in 2020–2021 lasted for approximately nine months, severely impacting the education of both traditional and mature students across Nigeria, including at the University of Jos.

Impact of Academic Strikes on Mature Students

1 Disruption of Academic Timelines

For mature students, one of the key challenges in pursuing HE is time management. These students often balance their academic responsibilities with work, family obligations, and other personal commitments. Therefore, prolonged strikes, such as those organised by ASUU, pose significant challenges for mature students, as they lead to the extension of academic

sessions. For instance, the frequent strikes that disrupt university schedules make it difficult for mature students to plan their lives and meet academic deadlines, leading to delays in graduation and, in some cases, the abandonment of their educational goals. Mature students often face time constraints because of their other responsibilities, such as full-time employment or childcare. A disruption in the academic calendar means that these students must wait for longer periods before completing their studies, leading to extended exposure to the academic environment and the potential risk of exhaustion. Delayed graduations are particularly problematic for mature students who may face challenges in securing professional recognition, career advancement, or other job-related opportunities without timely completion of their studies (Adebayo, 2018).

2 **Financial Strain**

Mature students often self-finance their education, especially those who are employed full time and are not in receipt of scholarships or family support. As strikes stretch out the duration of academic programmes, students face increased tuition costs, as well as added living expenses. For many mature students, additional costs associated with extended academic programmes, including the need to fund their education for a longer period, can lead to financial burden. Moreover, prolonged strikes may lead to lost income, particularly for students who are simultaneously informally self-employed on campus or the settlement around the university while studying. Within and around the university campus, informal business such as food sellers, cab drivers, tricycle transporters, phone-repair shops, fuel stations, hair salons and some others usually flourish when the school is in session. Some of the owners and their children use the opportunity to go to school and the income drops drastically during holidays or when there is a strike action. In fact, some temporarily close shop during the strikes. Some mature students depend on their salaries to fund their education and meet personal needs. A long strike means these students might not be able to attend classes or complete academic requirements in a timely manner, resulting in both lost salaries and prolonged academic costs.

3 **Psychological and Emotional Stress**

The uncertainty caused by industrial action in universities can be particularly stressful for mature students who often face personal, financial, and professional pressures. For example, the psychological stress caused by indefinite closures or delays in resuming academic activities because of strikes can discourage mature students from continuing their studies. This is particularly relevant for those with family responsibilities or full-time employment, where periods of uncertainty can lead to frustration, disengagement and ultimately a decision to drop out of school. In the case of the University of Jos, as with many other Nigerian universities, students who

are unable to complete their studies on time may also experience emotional distress. The social stigma associated with delayed graduation can be significant as it often leads to feelings of shame, embarrassment and inadequacy (Frost, 2011). Mature students, especially those who re-entered HE to improve their professional qualifications, may feel additional pressure to graduate on time to secure job promotions or enhance their career prospects. When strikes interfere with these plans, it can create additional personal and family stress.

4 **Impact on Career Progression**

For mature students, HE is often a means to improve career prospects, whether it is through gaining new qualifications, enhancing professional skills, or making career transitions. Delays in graduation caused by strikes can directly hinder these aspirations. In particular, students who are engaged in career development programmes or trying to advance in their current jobs may find themselves held back by the lack of timely graduation. Furthermore, in fields that require continuous education and certification, such delays may result in a mismatch between the education timeline and the job market's demand for skilled professionals. For example, a mature student pursuing a degree in education, law, or health sciences may find that the delay in completing their programme hinders their ability to enter the workforce or secure promotions within their current employment. For these students, delayed graduation caused by strike actions may significantly impact their career trajectories (Adebayo, 2018). This impact is further compounded by the National Youth Service Corp (NYSC) scheme. NYSC makes it mandatory for first degree graduates below the age of 30 to serve for a year; aimed at fostering national unity and integration by exposing them to diverse cultures in different parts of Nigeria (NYSC, 1993). The programme exempts part-time students, a population to which most mature learners belong. Students of Health Sciences and Law have longer courses of 5 years to obtain their licence to practice, as stipulated by the Medical and Dental Council of Nigeria and the Council of Legal Education respectively as professional and accreditation organisations. Employers usually prefer graduates with NYSC certificates because they believe that they are younger and have more vitality. Therefore, any delay because of any strike action by university unions can affect mature students significantly.

5 **Social and Family Impact**

Mature students are often the primary breadwinners for their families, and their education may be critical not only for their personal advancement but also for improving the quality of life for their dependents. The disruption of academic programmes because of strikes can lead to a ripple effect, impacting their family life and financial wellbeing. Extended periods of study

delay might require mature students to adjust their personal schedules, increase their financial expenditures and rely more heavily on family support. In some cases, mature students may also experience the loss of social support from their families, who may view prolonged education as a sign of failure or delayed progress.

Administrative Responses to Strike Actions

The response of the University of Jos administration to academic industrial action has been mixed, with efforts made to minimise disruption and ensure that students complete their studies. However, the delays caused by strikes often require the university to adjust its academic calendar, which can have negative consequences for mature students, particularly those who must plan around their work schedules. Despite these challenges, the university has also worked to provide some level of support for mature students, including offering flexible class schedules and online learning options. However, these efforts are not always sufficient in mitigating the far-reaching consequences of industrial actions. The effect of academic strike can be clearly seen in Table 6.1 where the university management was compelled to cancel the 2021/2022 academic session.

TABLE 6.1 Students' Enrolment by Gender for Four Previous Sessions (Academic Planning Unit, University of Jos)

<i>N</i>	<i>Faculties</i>	2019–2020		2020–2021		2021–2022		2022–2023	
		<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>
1	Arts	1715	2583	1706	2672	0	0	1501	2324
2	Agricultural Science	740	511	733	555	0	0	1003	782
3	Education	3867	4025	3793	4025	0	0	3709	4076
4	Natural Sciences	3204	2612	3134	2645	0	0	3027	2637
5	Engineering	1071	265	1029	267	0	0	1245	358
6	Social Sciences	2095	1277	2001	1340	0	0	2074	1404
7	Management Sciences	1544	1700	1481	1705	0	0	1260	1536
8	Environmental Sciences	1853	582	1824	552	0	0	1696	509
9	Law	430	517	430	517			413	540
10	College Of Health	1659	1486	1944	1783	0	0	2097	1966
11	Pharm. Sciences	363	297	374	305			392	296
12	Veterinary Medicine	140	70	140	70			145	77
	Total	18681	15925	18589	16436	0	0	18562	16505

Recommendations for Strike Actions

1 *Government and Institutional Collaboration*

To address the impact of strikes on mature students, it is crucial for Nigerian universities and the government to collaborate more effectively in addressing the root causes of industrial actions. United Nations Educational and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) advocates that developing countries allocate about 26% of their total budget to education (Ebi and Ubi, 2017). In the 2025 budget appropriation of Nigeria of ₦49.74tn (\$33.16bn), only ₦3.54 (\$2.36bn) has been allocated to the education sector which is 7.12% of the budget (Budget.org, 2025). In 2024, the allocation to education was ₦2.18trn (\$1.45) out of ₦27.5trn (\$18.32) which was 7.9% of the budget. This shows that the allocation is decreasing and inadequate as measured by UNESCO recommendation. Indeed, universities will have to cope with a shortage of funds. Increasing funding for universities, improving staff salaries and working conditions, and ensuring better management of academic affairs can help minimise the frequency and duration of strikes, thereby reducing disruptions to students' academic progress.

2 *Flexibility in Academic Programmes*

Given the unique needs of mature students, universities should introduce more flexible academic programmes that accommodate the schedules of working adults. This could include offering weekend or evening classes, creating hybrid learning environments, or allowing students to complete coursework through online platforms. The Governing Councils should also enact policies that give flexibility to examination boards for the approval of examinations. These measures would help reduce the impact of strikes on the academic progress of mature students and allow them to manage their academic responsibilities more effectively.

3 *Enhanced Support for Mature Students*

It is also important for universities to provide better support for mature students during times of academic disruption. This support could include financial aid, mental health services, career counselling, academic advising and access to childcare services. These are ways of prioritising the unique needs of mature students, who often face additional challenges in balancing their education with family and professional obligations. Industrial or strike action has a profound impact on the academic experiences of mature students in Nigerian universities, particularly at the University of Jos where local strikes have led to constant adjustments of academic calendars. These strikes create significant delays, financial burdens, and emotional stress, undermining the educational and career aspirations of mature students. To minimise these impacts, it is essential for the government, universities, and other stakeholders to enact policies that support timely graduation

The Effects of Crises and Insecurity on Widening Access for Mature Students in Higher Education in Nigeria: A Case Study of the University of Jos

Nigeria's HE sector has faced numerous challenges over the years, with crises and insecurity among the most disruptive factors. These crises, which range from ethnic and religious conflicts to insurgencies and localised violence, have severely impacted both students and educational institutions. The University of Jos, located in Plateau State, Nigeria, has been particularly affected by insecurity in the region, which has disrupted academic activities, hampered access to education, and made it difficult for students, particularly mature students, to pursue their academic goals. When insecurity and crises disrupt educational activities, the impact on mature students can be profound, as they may not have the flexibility to adjust their schedules or plans.

Understanding the Nature of Crises and Insecurity in Nigeria

In recent years, Nigeria has witnessed a rise in both internal and external crises that have created significant instability. These include:

- 1 *Ethnic and Religious Conflicts*: Nigeria is home to a diverse population, with over 250 ethnic groups and a wide range of religious beliefs. Inter-communal violence between ethnic and religious groups, particularly in the Middle Belt region, where the University of Jos is located, has been a significant source of insecurity. Clashes between herders and farmers, as well as inter-religious violence, have contributed to a volatile security environment.
- 2 *Insurgency and Terrorism*: The ongoing insurgency in the northeast of Nigeria, primarily led by Boko Haram and its splinter group, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), has destabilised large parts of the country. Although not directly affecting the University of Jos, the ripple effect of such instability has contributed to a generalised insecurity that affects students across the country.
- 3 *Kidnapping and Armed Robbery*: In recent years, kidnappings for ransom have become a major source of insecurity in Nigeria. Students, including those at the University of Jos, are at risk of being kidnapped, adding another layer of uncertainty and fear to their educational journey.
- 4 *Political Instability*: Periodic political unrest, including violent protests and elections-related violence also contributes to the overall insecurity in the country.

These crises not only affect the safety of students and staff but also have far-reaching consequences on the academic environment, with direct implications for widening access to education for vulnerable groups, particularly mature students.

The Impact of Crises and Insecurity on Access to Higher Education for Mature Students

1 *Disruption of Academic Schedules*

Crises and insecurity have a direct impact on the academic calendar, leading to the suspension of lectures, closure of campuses, and delays in examinations. For mature students, these disruptions can be particularly frustrating. The academic calendar at the University of Jos has, at times, been severely disrupted because of security concerns in the region. In such instances, mature students may have to adjust their academic plans, resulting in delayed graduation and extended periods of study. The frequent closures of campuses in response to security threats, such as those witnessed in Plateau State some years back, made it difficult for mature students to attend classes regularly. For example, during periods of religious and ethnic violence in Jos, the university was temporarily closed, which caused delays in academic progression for many students. For mature students, who may already face challenges in attending classes because of work or family obligations, such closures can lead to significant setbacks

2 *Increased Financial Burden*

Mature students, particularly those who have income to cover their expenses or have dependents, may find it difficult to absorb the added costs of extended academic timelines caused by crises and insecurity. Many mature students are employed full-time while studying, and disruptions caused by insecurity may lead to missed work opportunities. As a result, they may face financial strain, as they need to finance their education for a longer period without the guarantee of timely academic progression. Moreover, in regions affected by insecurity, costs related to safety and transportation also rise. For instance, students in Jos who need to travel to the university may incur additional costs for safe travel, especially when there are reports of kidnappings or violent clashes along major routes. The inability to attend classes regularly, because of security threats or university closures, often leads to additional expenses in trying to catch up on coursework, assignments, and examinations.

3 *Psychological and Emotional Stress*

The environment of insecurity in Nigeria can worsen psychological stress among students, particularly for mature students who are already balancing multiple responsibilities. The fear for personal safety, the safety of family members, and the uncertainty surrounding the resumption of academic activities can cause significant emotional distress. The constant insecurity in Jos, exacerbated by reports of attacks and kidnappings, has made some students reconsider their academic pursuits or transfer to universities in more secure areas of the country.

4 *Inaccessibility of Learning Materials and Resources*

Insecurity not only affects the safety of students but also impacts their access to essential learning resources. Libraries, computer labs, and other academic facilities are often closed during periods of insecurity. For mature students, who may not have the same level of access to digital or remote learning resources as younger students, this can pose a significant barrier to academic progress. Furthermore, insecurity affects the availability of academic staff. Professors and lecturers may be unable or unwilling to commute to campus during times of heightened insecurity, leading to a reduction in the number of available courses, postponed examinations, and cancelled classes. This loss of access to essential educational resources further impedes the academic advancement of mature students, who may already face challenges in attending classes and completing assignments on time.

5 *Social and Family Impacts*

Mature students are often primary caregivers or the main financial providers for their families. In states like Jos in Plateau State, the fear for the safety of loved ones adds to the strain of balancing family life and academic work. The impact of crises and insecurity on students' families can increase the burden on mature students, who may have to take additional time off from their studies to care for affected relatives. Family members who are directly impacted by violent conflicts or kidnappings may require financial and emotional support, further pulling mature students away from their studies. For example, during times of ethnic clashes in Jos, some mature students had to divert their attention from academic work to address the immediate safety and wellbeing of their families.

6 *Reduced Enrolment and Participation in Education*

Crises and insecurity not only affect students who are already enrolled but can also deter potential mature students from pursuing HE altogether. For some individuals considering returning to education, the risks associated with insecurity in specific states such as Plateau State, may be a deterrent. The perception of danger, coupled with the challenges posed by disrupted academic calendars and uncertain security conditions, can reduce the number of mature students who are willing to enrol in programmes at the University of Jos. This can disproportionately affect those who are already at a disadvantage in terms of access to education, such as women and those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Addressing the Challenges

1 *Improving Campus Security*

To address the insecurity affecting students, institutions like the University of Jos need to enhance campus security measures. This could include

increased funding for security personnel, improved surveillance systems, and better collaboration with local authorities and Neighbourhood Watch to ensure the safety of students, especially mature students who may be more vulnerable. Additionally, providing students with clear information on security risks and safety protocols would help alleviate concerns.

2 *Flexible Learning and Remote Education*

Given the increasing challenges posed by insecurity, universities should consider implementing more flexible learning models, including online and hybrid options. This would allow mature students, who may be more likely to have work or family obligations, to continue their studies regardless of physical barriers or safety concerns. Remote learning platforms and digital resources can enable students to access course materials and participate in lectures from home, minimising the disruption caused by campus closures. Although at the 2023 second regular meeting of the University of Jos Senate held on 24 August, 2023, it approved the hybrid model for meetings and learning which encompasses lectures, seminars and PhD *viva voce* to be conducted online, implementation is still at the very basic stage (University of Jos, 2023).

3 *Financial Support for Affected Students*

To mitigate the financial strain caused by prolonged academic disruptions, universities and government agencies should provide financial support for mature students affected by insecurity. This could include emergency funding, scholarships, or interest-free loans to help students who are facing financial hardship because of extended periods of study, loss of income, or additional expenses incurred during times of insecurity.

4 *Encouraging Community Engagement and Peacebuilding*

In addition to institutional measures, there is a need for community engagement and peacebuilding initiatives. The University of Jos Centre for Conflict Management and Peace Studies (CECOMPS) should be empowered to lead this initiative. Universities in conflict-prone areas, such as the University of Jos, can play an active role in peacebuilding efforts by engaging with local communities, promoting dialogue, and creating initiatives that foster peaceful coexistence. This would contribute to reducing the insecurity in the region and provide a more stable environment for mature students to pursue their academic goals.

In summary, crises and insecurity in Nigeria have a profound effect on widening access to HE for mature students, particularly at institutions such as the University of Jos. The challenges of disrupted academic schedules, financial strain, psychological stress, and limited access to learning resources are significant barriers to academic success for these students. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, including improved security measures, flexible learning options, financial support, and a commitment to peacebuilding in affected communities. Through

these efforts, Nigeria can ensure that mature students have equitable access to HE, even in times of crisis.

Culture and Widening Access for Mature Students in Higher Education in Nigeria

In Nigeria, HE plays a significant role in personal and national development (Amaghionyeodiwe and Osinubi, 2012). However, the access and participation of certain groups, particularly mature students, face several socio-cultural barriers. One of the most prominent barriers to their participation in HE is the influence of African cultural values and norms. African culture, including traditional gender roles, family expectations and community structures, significantly affects mature students' access to education. This cultural framework can either support or inhibit their educational pursuits, especially for those returning to study in Nigerian universities such as the University of Jos. This section examines the socio-cultural factors that either promote or hinder their academic pursuits, particularly for women and older adults who face additional societal pressures.

African Culture and Higher Education in Nigeria

African culture, particularly in Nigeria, is deeply rooted in traditions, family values, and communal living. Cultural norms and practices significantly shape individual behaviours, expectations and access to opportunities (Owoo, Shifa, Ranchhod and Zhang, 2025). In the context of HE, these cultural elements can influence the willingness and ability of mature students to engage in academic programmes.

Key Cultural Norms and Practices Affecting Mature Students

- 1 *Gender Roles and Expectations:* African societies, including Nigerian communities, have traditionally assigned distinct roles to men and women. These roles are often rooted in patriarchal values, where men are expected to be the primary breadwinners, and women are typically expected to prioritise home management and child-rearing. For mature students, particularly women, these gender roles can create significant barriers to accessing HE. The societal pressure on women to fulfil domestic responsibilities often takes precedence over their personal academic goals, making it more difficult for them to return to university.
- 2 *Family Expectations:* In Nigerian culture, the family unit plays a crucial role in an individual's life. There is an expectation that children will care for their parents, and this responsibility can extend into adulthood. For mature students, particularly those who are financially independent or already have

families of their own, the demands of caregiving and providing for extended family members can conflict with the time and energy needed for academic study.

- 3 *Cultural Perceptions of Education:* In some Nigerian communities, formal education has traditionally been valued less for older adults compared to younger generations. Elders in the community might view education as the domain of younger individuals and may question the relevance of a mature student pursuing HE. Additionally, some African cultures emphasise vocational training and apprenticeship over academic qualifications, which can limit the perception of the value of university education for mature students.
- 4 *Community and Peer Pressure:* In African societies, the sense of community is strong, and there is often considerable peer pressure to conform to societal expectations. For mature students, particularly those attending universities like the University of Jos, the pressure to maintain a certain image in the community or to fulfil expected roles may conflict with their educational ambitions. This cultural expectation may lead to feelings of isolation and discourage mature students from returning to university.

The Role of the University of Jos in Supporting Mature Students

The University of Jos has made strides to accommodate a diverse student body, including mature students. The university offers programmes that cater to adult learners, such as part-time and evening classes which, however, are not held beyond 6pm. However, despite these accommodations, the broader cultural factors within Nigerian society continue to influence the participation of mature students in HE.

Institutional Efforts and Challenges

- 1 *Part-Time and Evening Programmes:* The University of Jos offers part-time and evening programmes to accommodate mature students who are already engaged in full-time work or have family responsibilities. These programmes provide flexibility in terms of scheduling, making it easier for mature students to pursue HE while balancing other commitments.
- 2 *Support Services:* The University of Jos also provides support services such as counselling, academic mentoring, and career services through the Youth Friendly Centre, the Student Affairs Unit and the Directorate of Alumni Relations to help mature students navigate the challenges of university life. However, these services are not always culturally sensitive, and some mature students may feel uncomfortable seeking help or support, particularly in a community where age limits enthusiasm for academic pursuits and only the strong-willed dare to venture.

- 3 *Challenges of Cultural Acceptance:* Despite the university's efforts to support mature students, cultural acceptance remains a significant barrier. The cultural expectation for men and women, especially in conservative societies like Jos, to focus on family and community responsibilities may deter mature students from enrolling or completing their studies. For women in particular, cultural expectations of domestic activities may override their desire for undergraduate education, and the stigma of returning to school later in life may prevent them from taking advantage of these opportunities.
- 4 *Reluctance to Pursue HE:* Some potential mature students, especially from rural areas around Jos, may not view university education as essential or relevant for their future. Traditional beliefs that prioritise agricultural work or trade skills over academic qualifications can limit the number of individuals, especially older adults, who choose to pursue HE at the University of Jos. Additionally, some parents may not view the investment in their mature children's education as necessary, particularly if their children have already established careers or families.

The Impact of African Culture on Access to Education for Mature Students

1 Gender-Based Barriers

In Nigerian society, women face more significant cultural barriers to accessing HE compared to men. This is especially true for women of older age who are more likely to be married with children or may be expected to care for ageing parents. These cultural expectations can limit women's freedom to pursue academic opportunities, as they may be expected to prioritise family over education. At the University of Jos, many females report facing resistance from family members who view education as secondary to household and caregiving duties. In many African cultures, education for women, particularly in older age groups, is often viewed as a 'luxury' rather than a necessity. This can create a cultural barrier that discourages women from returning to HE. Additionally, mature women who wish to pursue academic careers often face societal judgements regarding their roles as wives and mothers, which may limit their access to HE.

2 Family Responsibilities and Support Systems

In African culture, especially in Nigerian communities, extended family networks often play a crucial role in an individual's life. While these networks can be supportive in terms of providing childcare support for nursing mothers or picking-up children from schools, they can be a burden for mature students. This communal support system means that mature students often have responsibilities that extend beyond their immediate families. These responsibilities can include caring for elderly parents, supporting siblings or contributing to extended family obligations. These family and community

expectations can conflict with the demands of HE. For mature students, particularly those from rural or semi-urban areas, balancing the demands of family life with academic study becomes a significant challenge. For instance, some students at the University of Jos may face resistance when they express interest in attending evening or weekend classes, as it conflicts with cultural expectations for family members to be present at home during these times.

3 *Social Stigma and Perception of Education*

There is a general perception in many Nigerian communities, particularly in rural areas, that formal education is primarily for the youth. This belief can lead to a social stigma against mature students, who are seen as 'too old' to be attending university. In this cultural context, mature students may face ridicule or judgement from their peers, which discourages them from pursuing HE. At the University of Jos, some mature students have reported feelings of isolation because of the age gap between them and traditional students. The social stigma against adult learners can impact their academic confidence and sense of belonging. For these students, the cultural pressure to conform to age-appropriate societal roles may outweigh the desire to pursue academic qualifications.

4 *Cultural Preferences for Vocational Training*

In many African cultures, including Nigerian culture, vocational training is often prioritised over academic education. This cultural preference stems from the belief that practical skills and trade work provide more immediate economic returns compared to academic qualifications. As a result, many older individuals who would have benefited from HE choose instead to pursue vocational or entrepreneurial endeavours. In Plateau State for example, communities may prefer that their children or adult members acquire skills in agriculture, trading, or craftsmanship rather than pursue academic degrees. This cultural preference can limit the motivation of mature students to pursue university degrees at the University of Jos and can result in lower enrolment numbers for older students.

Recommendations for Overcoming Cultural Barriers

- 1 *Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity in University Programmes:* The University of Jos should implement programmes that are culturally sensitive and encourage family support for mature students. By emphasising the value of education for all members of society, the university can help shift cultural attitudes towards HE.
- 2 *Community Outreach and Advocacy:* University outreach programmes that engage with local communities can help dispel misconceptions about the value of education for mature adults, particularly women. Community

leaders and elders can play an instrumental role in changing attitudes and encouraging adult learning.

- 3 *Support for Female Mature Students:* Special programmes targeting mature women, such as childcare services or flexible learning options, could help alleviate the burden of family responsibilities. Female students should also be encouraged by university lecturers and staff to pursue their academic goals.
- 4 *Increasing Family Engagement:* Engaging families in the educational journeys of mature students can help alleviate the cultural resistance to education. Providing families with information on the benefits of HE could encourage their support and remove some of the societal pressures that hinder mature students.

Gender and Widening Access for Mature Students in Higher Education in Nigeria

Introduction

In recent years, HE in Nigeria has become increasingly accessible to diverse segments of the population, including mature students. However, access to HE is not equally distributed across all groups, with gender being a key factor influencing participation. In Nigeria, traditional gender norms, societal expectations, and institutional policies have shaped the educational experiences of men and women differently, particularly for mature students. Mature students in Nigerian universities, such as the University of Jos, face unique challenges that stem not only from their age and life responsibilities but also from gender-related barriers. These barriers can range from family expectations and societal perceptions to institutional structures that may inadvertently favour male students over female students. This section examines the gendered challenges and opportunities that shape the educational experiences of mature male and female students and suggests ways to improve access for both groups.

Background: Gender and Higher Education in Nigeria

Gender inequalities in Nigerian HE are deeply rooted in societal norms, historical contexts, and institutional practices. Although Nigeria has made significant strides towards gender equality in education, challenges persist, particularly in terms of access to and participation in HE for women. According to UNESCO (2020), while the gender gap in primary and secondary education has narrowed, the disparity in tertiary education still exists, with women being underrepresented in many fields of study. In Nigerian universities, women are notably underrepresented in a wide range of subject areas. According to the National Universities Commission (2017), women make up just 24% of

students enrolled in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) programmes. Additionally, women make up 42% of students enrolled in business and management degrees (Ogundipe, 2020) and just 30% of students enrolled in agricultural science programmes (Ajewole, 2019). These figures demonstrate the considerable gender gaps in Nigeria's educational sector affecting employment prospects. For mature students, gender sometimes influences their decision to return to university, the support they receive and their ability to complete their studies. Women, in particular, face obstacles, in line with gender roles, that go beyond the challenges of returning to school later in life. These include societal expectations about their roles in the home and family, as well as the perceived value of education for women, especially in rural or conservative areas. The University of Jos, located in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria, provides an ideal case study to explore these issues, as it serves a diverse student body from different socio-cultural backgrounds. According to criteria set by the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB), which is recognised by law to be the coordinating admission authority in Nigeria, the University of Jos serves seven states. They are Benue, Kebbi, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger and Plateau (JAMB, 2025). This makes the University to be the melting pot of cultures and women who come from outside Jos including women who are nursing mothers or with little children, and who face challenges because their family networks that support them are beyond reach.

Sexual Harassment and Gender Discrimination as a Barrier to Access for Mature Students

Sexual harassment and gender discrimination remain persistent issues in many Nigerian universities, including the University of Jos. While these challenges affect all students, mature female students may be more vulnerable because of their age and life experience. Some mature students report being treated as 'outsiders' or 'inferior' to younger students, particularly in environments where they are the minority. Moreover, mature female students may experience harassment from male students or staff, which discourages them from fully participating in academic life. The lack of gender-sensitive policies to address these issues may further deter women from seeking support or reporting incidents of harassment. Such challenges can hinder their academic progress and lead to early withdrawal from their studies. The enrolment of female students has always been lower than their male counterparts as reflected in Table 6.1.

Gender-Sensitive Policies and Strategies for Widening Access

To improve access for mature students at the University of Jos, particularly for women, several gender-sensitive policies and strategies need to be implemented:

1 *Flexible Learning Programmes*

One of the most effective ways to support mature students, especially women, is by providing more flexible learning options. Evening classes, online courses, and part-time study programmes would allow students with family responsibilities to balance their academic, professional, and domestic obligations. The University of Jos has already introduced part-time programmes but increasing the availability of evening and weekend classes would further support mature women who are constrained by daytime family duties.

2 *Financial Support and Scholarships*

Increasing access to financial aid and scholarships such as the NELFUND and Federal Scholarship Board (FSB) for mature female students is essential. These funds would help alleviate the financial burden of tuition, textbooks, and other educational expenses. Special scholarships for female students, particularly those returning to education after a significant break, would also help level the playing field and reduce the financial barriers to access.

3 *Gender Sensitisation and Awareness*

The University of Jos should engage in gender sensitisation campaigns aimed at faculty, staff, and students to raise awareness of the challenges faced by mature female students. These campaigns should focus on eliminating stereotypes, promoting gender equality and fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students.

4 *Support Networks and Mentoring Programmes*

Establishing mentorship programmes and support networks specifically for female mature students can help them navigate the challenges of returning to education. Peer support groups and mentorship by senior female students or alumni can provide emotional and academic support, as well as guidance on how to balance academic responsibilities with family life.

5 *Strict Enforcement of Anti-Discrimination Policies*

The University of Jos should implement and enforce anti-discrimination policies that protect mature female students from harassment, discrimination and bias as clearly stated in the University Gender Policy. This would create a safer and more welcoming environment for all students, encouraging mature women to participate more fully in university life. The University Centre for Gender and Women Studies (CGWS) should be encouraged to champion this course.

Conclusion

Gender plays a significant role in widening access to HE for mature students in Nigeria, and this is particularly evident at the University of Jos. While mature

students face challenges related to age, family, and finances, gender-specific barriers such as societal expectations, financial constraints, and gender discrimination further limit women's ability to access and succeed in HE. Addressing these challenges requires gender-sensitive policies, flexible learning options, and greater institutional support. By improving access for mature women, the University of Jos can contribute to a more inclusive and equitable HE system in Nigeria.

Finally, widening access to HE for mature students is essential for personal empowerment, economic development, and social equity. By providing opportunities for mature students to enhance their skills, change careers and improve their economic circumstances, societies can create a more inclusive and innovative future. Additionally, supporting mature learners fosters a culture of lifelong learning, which is crucial in adapting to the demands of a rapidly changing world. To ensure that these opportunities are available, it is crucial to provide flexible learning options and tailored support for mature students. Ultimately, widening access to HE benefits not only the individuals who take part in it but also society as a whole. While the University of Jos has made significant strides in accommodating mature students, there is still room for improvement. By enhancing financial support, expanding flexible learning options, and offering more tailored academic services, the institution can help ensure that mature learners have the resources and environment necessary to succeed in higher education.

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7

LIFE EXPERIENCES OF MIGRANT STUDENT MOTHERS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Ron Cambridge

Introduction

Migrant Mothers (MM) and Higher Education (HE) are both perceived as an ‘agent of change’ (Lisiak, 2017; Stephens et al., 2008, respectfully). The focus of this chapter, based on an extensive research study, is the experiences and perspectives of Migrant Student Mothers (MSM) in HE, within the context of Widening Access for Mature Students (WAMS).

Lisiak (2017) highlights the unique position of MM to question accepted cultural norms, both within the country of origin and in the host country, and are consequently recognised as *agents of change*. Moreover, these unique experiences provide that MSM hold distinctively enhanced benefits but also issues that are different from other WAMS.

The purpose of this chapter is therefore to explore knowledge that brings to light the position of MSM as a significant WAMS stakeholder group, albeit an invisible one. The chapter is structured into three main components: firstly, an exploration of the literature concerning mothers and MM; secondly, an examination of experiences of Student Parents (SP) in HE; and, thirdly, a portrayal of experiences of MSM in HE, using notions of hope (Freire, 1994).

Mothers and Migrant Mothers as Key Stakeholders

Within society, mothers and MM hold key positions as they help shape current and future society (Gedalof, 2009; Osgood, 2010; Dyck, 2017; Erel et al., 2017). Dyck (2017, p. 1) recognises MM’s position ‘within the home and the local community, [and who] have a wider significance than the merely familiar or local’. O’Connor et al. (2008) also observe that mothers are deemed a key

stakeholder group to business organisations. Within universities, Student Mothers (SM) may be accepted as a part of a valid WAMS stakeholder group, yet unlike employees who are mothers, SM are not provided for by law, with maternity leave or flexible working conditions (DfBIS, 2011). With little attention given to Student Parents (SP) within universities, they endure a marginalised position, and Cambridge (2018, 2021) highlights how MSM endure the double disadvantage of invisibility as mothers and as migrants.

While the current media and policy debate on migration (Syal, 2023) tends to present a discursively negative portrayal of migrants as needy, interfering with social cohesion or burdening users of the social and health provisions within the welfare state (Erel et al., 2017; Bork-Hüffer, 2022) the debate fails to recognise how MM can actually act as a positive lens for society as a whole (Nardo, 2011). Erel and Reynolds (2014) emphasise the imperative significance of MM who do not simply become citizens themselves, but they also bring up future citizens. Similarly, Dyck (2017, p. 3) stresses MM's 'routine everyday activity in the home and communities in supporting societal shifts – in economic, social, and cultural domain', but that most MMs experience and activities are 'invisible in the sense of its contribution to the making of citizens and the ongoing constitution of nation states'.

Given the migration position, Lisiak (2017) and Cambridge (2018) argue that MM are in a unique position to question different and diverse ideals within society, especially that of motherhood, not only from their own accepted national epitomes, but also the new socially experienced norms which they encounter in the host country. The uniqueness of the educational function that is played by MM is the position they hold in permitting the transmission of cultural capital legacy on a global and transgenerational scale, which, given their position as migrants, is guided by their continuous participation in, and exposure to, diversity and cultures, particularly diverse mothering practices and discourses (Cambridge, 2018, 2021). Ergo, Lisiak (2017) termed MM as 'agents of change' which highlights MMs' role in bringing up future citizens and as holding valuable properties within society's future. The HE literature and discourse of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) expose similar portrayals of students and of universities as 'change agents and as agents of change' (Stephens et al., 2008). However, Erel (2011) and Lisiak (2017) demonstrate that MM are in fact commonly *invisible* in national discourses on migration, family, and motherhood, as well as in HE, while Cambridge (2018, 2021) revealed that this invisibility also exists in HE discourses in the UK and internationally, leading to a discriminatory and limiting approach.

Student Parents

The body of research engaging with the complexities of being a WAMS student demonstrates the weakness of many masculine discourses in HE (Khwaja et al.,

2017; Baker, 2017; Quinn, 2003) which discursively position MSM as invisible and disadvantaged. In addition, data from the National Union of Students (NUS, 2009) demonstrates that SP are not actually formally recognised as a 'group', not even as WAMS stakeholders, and therefore any issues faced by them are invisible to universities, management and policy makers. While there is no statistical information on the numbers of SP in the UK (Evans, 2009), this gravely limits the ability to provide meaningful support to SP (NUS, 2009). Hence, Moreau and Kerner (2012) point out that universities, policy makers and academic writers have also overlooked the need to explore differing aspects of the experiences and requirements of SP, with little consideration by way of research and/or policy intervention.

Research indicates that SP typically are mature women studying part-time, with a significant number being lone parents (NUS, 2009) while Moreau and Kerner (2012) highlight that all research, albeit scant, points to the marginalised and invisible position of SP at HE, particularly as SM continue to bear the main responsibility for raising and caring for their children (Wainwright and Marandet, 2009).

Motivational Reasons for Parents Entering Higher Education

The changing characteristics of HE and other government initiatives, particularly since the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, UK (Quinn, 2003), have led to an innovative HE system that is a diversified and more flexible education system that has welcomed non-traditional students, such as WAMS, including SP. Acknowledging SP's experiences lays the foundations for understanding the context of migrant student mothers' perspective, given that MM share all the characteristics of the SP in HE. The motivational rationale of SP to enter HE may be considered to be the following: qualification and employment; personal self-actualisation; role model for children; personal circumstances. This is further explored below.

Qualification and Employment

The UK trade and workers union UNITE (2006) highlights employment as a general motive for entering HE. Scott et al. (1998) found that qualification and employment are the main reasons for SP to enter HE, and thus SP are more likely to be overrepresented on vocational and professional courses (NUS, 2009). White (2008) observed that most SM are clustered around disciplines such as nursing and education, as these are seen as 'feminine' and are associated with the traditional role of the mother. Similarly, Lyonette et al. (2015) found mothers' choice of degrees related to having specific jobs in mind, such as mid-wifery, teaching or social work. Thus, there are close links between migration

and employment (Kaestner et al., 2003), employment and motherhood (Khwaja et al., 2017; Quinn, 2003; Garey, 1999) as well as employment and education (Marginson, 2013). The motivational drive for SM to enter education also includes the availability of funds from employers and sponsors, in the form of university fees and living expenses, as well as guaranteed future employment to return to (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010), along with low work satisfaction as well as low career prospects at the previous workplace (Scott et al., 1998).

Self-Actualisation

The idea of self-actualisation, as presented at the top of Maslow's 1970 Hierarchy of Needs (Mullins, 2010) is not unrelated to women and mothers in the HE literature (Wainwright and Marandet, 2009). Lyonette et al. (2015) highlight that SM value their education as it benefits them in terms of increased self-confidence and self-fulfilment. Notwithstanding the potential economic benefit through future employment prospects, SM discover that through education they become stimulated and develop the desire for additional knowledge. Accordingly, SM no longer perceive themselves as passive women (Carrim, 2017), for example, by expecting their husbands to have more involvement in childcare and household responsibilities.

Quinn (2003) shows that many SM enter education with the belief that university is a place that would assist in self-evaluation, develop new identities, explore new potentials or alternatively discover their own limitations. By this, universities are seen as a transformative *change agents* offering empowerment and self-development, beyond the economic aspect of human capital. Leonard (1994) noted that women students felt the desire to enhance self-confidence or fulfil a private challenge. Correspondently, Khwaja et al. (2017) and Scott et al. (1998) show that graduate mothers had developed a personal identity beyond the roles of wives or mothers. Scott et al. (1998) found that SM expressed the belief that through their studies they will be better prepared to use their ability for the benefit of society.

Role Model for Children

Of great importance for SM is the desire to be an inspirational role model figure for their own children (Mulrenan et al., 2023). Moreover, Lyonette et al. (2015) found that SM appreciated the ability they developed to help their children make decisions about HE. Leonard (1994) and Reay et al. (2005) found that SM also wished to be able to provide for their children financially, and a better quality of life, which they could not offer with a 'dead-end' job. This is particularly the case for MM who are vital actors in facilitating the integration of their family and children into the host country (Dyck, 2017; Erel, 2011).

Personal Circumstances

Scott et al. (1998) explain that changing personal circumstances are further motives to enter HE, whereby dissatisfaction with current life circumstances mean SM use education to get their mind off their personal problems, or alternatively, to fill up any spare time to deal with boredom. Leonard's (1994) 'empty nest syndrome' means that WAMS women can feel dejected with doing 'the same thing day-in and day-out', while many previously stay-at-home mothers whose children have now entered education themselves, utilising the time previously occupied with childcare. Additional influences affecting SM include socio-economic class position, which was also found to be an underlying reason for the attrition of mature age SM in HE. Scott et al. (1996) found that SM from low social class backgrounds tend to abandon their studies because of low support for the concept of the mother's studying, lack of money, domestic responsibility and lack of knowledge or skills expected at university. Moreover, Scott et al. (1998) and Wainwright (2007) found that matrimonial separation had provoked SM to return to study.

Issues Affecting Student Parents in Higher Education

Given the motivational reasons for SP to enter HE and given Widening Participation (WP) opportunities in HE, it may be reasonable to assume that SM would inevitably perform well in their university studies and achieve educational success. Nevertheless, WAMS, and among them SM, face many obstacles and hindrances, which may not all be resolved financially, albeit with economic constraints resulting in great difficulties. Archer et al. (2004); Jackson (2005); Leathwood and Read (2009); Reay (2005) all showed that WAMS face a range of issues in terms of access, retention, and benefits from university education, as well as their subjective experiences of HE and the lack of sense of belonging.

Belonging: Need to Conform and Fit in

Belonging is said to be a fundamental human need that relates to the need to conform and the desire to fit in. Dyck (2017) demonstrates the complexity of the struggle for MM in terms of the cultural context of the host nation in terms of cooking, attire, fashion and even body size and shape norms. Edwards (1993) maintains that ideas of a division between public and private spheres are also applicable in education, especially for SM who have both family and education responsibilities in their lives. Cambridge (2018) explores the case of WP University as a space where MSM may *feel* they *belong* or perhaps feel alienated. Accordingly, the lack of mothers feeling they *belong* within HE is generally attributed to the traditional concept that student life and family life have been perceived as two independent and separable areas.

Reay et al. (2005) highlight that the need to conform is observed as a constraint even prior to entering HE, and it is evident in the choice of university. WAMS were found to choose universities where they can *feel* that they belong. However, it was also found that lack of availability of information for SM prompted feelings that they do not fit in within the university culture. Many SM expressed a lack of confidence while in university and felt they needed to internalise their private life (Mulrenan et al., 2023), being reluctant to access student services such as counselling, even if this was offered. Similarly, university policies, such as, ‘no child on campus’ policies or late availability of timetables, were also detrimental to the experiences of SM. Consequently, society as a whole and the ‘old fashioned’ nature of HE takes the view that individuals are self-governing and are expected to manage their own lives. SP are aware of these discourses and therefore attempt to conform.

Age

Feeling alienated from other traditional younger students for being unable to take part in social activities because of childcare obligations, or because other traditional students do not appreciate the difficulties associated with motherhood (Scott et al., 1998), the age of SP was also found to be a negative factor in academic performance (Pinilla and Munoz, 2005) and attrition (Scott et al., 1996; Moreau and Kerner, 2012). Younger SM with small children were likely to leave university because of reasons related to family, finance or childcare, whereas older SM were more likely to leave because of other practical difficulties or course dissatisfaction. Conversely, Jacobs and Berkowitz (2002) found that women over 25 years old, who tend to study part-time, were at a greater disadvantage for completion of their degrees than younger mothers. Pinilla and Munoz (2005) also found that the age of the SM lengthened their time to graduation.

Financial Hardship

SM expressed financial hardship in relation to both the financing of their studies and childcare costs (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010) while Scott et al. (1996) found that for mature SM, financial hardship was one element of attrition.

With the rise of university fees in the UK, the government offers several additional financial channels of support to aid with learning costs to those full-time SP who are permanent residents in England, the UK already receiving a student finance package. However, grant funding for childcare is inconsistent at all levels of education in the UK and does not reflect the real experience of SP, while tending to be available to undergraduate SP, whereas many SP may study part-time as a result of demands placed on their time (Evans, 2009).

UK Government and University Policies

Government policies were explored in the previous sections relating to financial hardship and availability of funding. Such policies and university childcare services are two fundamental issues for WAMS. OFFA, a UK finance company, recognises that SP not only ‘face greater challenges in accessing’ HE but also endure such challenges in staying in HE, predominantly because ‘the issues facing them include a lack of recognition of their support needs and problems accessing essential services’ (OFFA, 2017b). Wainwright and Marandet (2009) and Gonchar (1995) highlight the importance of on-site childcare provision services, such as within HEIs, which has proven to be an essential factor for the retention of SM. University childcare service provision not only provides SP with practical logistical solutions but is also an important element in constituting a supportive environment. However, Gaunt (2009) reveals that many universities and colleges have closed their university childcare facilities and campus nurseries on financial grounds.

Additionally, SM found universities’ facilities negatively unaccommodating, as for example long queues at administrative counters Wainwright and Marandet (2009). Many universities have a ‘no child on campus policy’ which causes both financial and logistical childcare problems. Other childcare issues are caused by the late availability of timetables, the inconvenience of the traditional timing of lectures (normally nine o’clock in the morning), or alternate timetables, where lectures of the same subject are taught on different days each week. However, there are some HEIs which offer support services to SP, for example ‘providing adapted spaces where student parents and carers can bring children’ (OFS, 2023). The problem remains that university policies can lead SM to encounter logistical problems with SM claiming that universities are less flexible than the workplace.

Family Support

Wainwright (2007) highlights the importance of family support in SM education experience. SP studying for a degree becomes a matter of sustained perseverance because it is a long journey where the help of the family has a substantial impact. Pinilla and Munoz (2005) also add that the help provided by the extended family with regards to childcare positively contributes to SM academic performance. Smith (1993, in Leonard, 1994) describes three types of support which husbands may provide for their wives during studies: practical, emotional and financial support, although husbands from a lower socio-economic class were found to provide less domestic and childcare support (Luke et al., 2014). Moreover, family hostility and lack of support were found to be significant reasons for SM course attrition (Scott et al., 1998). Scott et al. (1998) equated family support to the similar function that is served

by institutional on-site childcare. While SM family support also relates to other variables such as cultural and social values or family income, these demonstrate a wider complex stakeholder connectivity between WAMS, society and the environment.

Psychological Factors

Quimby and O'Brien (2006) found that many SM experience psychological distress as a result of having to balance their academic and domestic roles, while Gonchar (1995) exposes affective and psychological factors which influence SP while in education, whereby SM inhabit multiple roles which often lead to role conflict or distress. Similarly, Lynch (2008) refers to the SMs dilemma of the *symbolic nature* and the *structural elements* which the roles of mothers and students encompass. Given the masculine nature of HE (Khwaja et al., 2017) SM felt that their maternal needs were largely ignored (Gonchar, 1995) further pointing out a discourse of invisibility. Equally, SM have expressed the feelings of *guilt* because of a lack of availability at home or the reduced time spent with their children (Wainwright and Marandet, 2009).

Achieving Lower Grades than Own Potential

Findings relating to the educational performance of SM are mixed. Pinilla and Munoz (2005) found that the academic performance of SM was lower than that of other groups of students, and SM felt that due to lack of consideration by universities to their family obligations, their grades were adversely affected (Wainwright and Marandet, 2009). Lyonette et al. (2015) found high SM attrition late into the degree, often as a result of the stress of juggling childcare and domestic work or even employment. Conversely, Scott et al. (1996, 1998) showed that SM not only academically outperformed their non-parent student counterparts, but they have also experienced an increase in ability and life satisfaction.

Attitude of University Staff

Maskrey and Stone (2015) noted that SM relational connection with a staff member, such as a mentor, led to an increased self-confidence and enhanced self-belief. Gonchar (1995) too found that women students felt a higher level of satisfaction when they experienced good interpersonal relationships with university staff. Scott et al. (1996) asserted that in cases where SM suffered family hostility towards their studies, SM have turned to university staff (and/or fellow students) as a main source of support. However, lack of academic support and staff hostility were also reasons for SMs' attrition in subjects that have a masculine tradition.

However, Wainwright and Marandet (2009) reveal that the attitude of staff towards SM varied from accommodating to rigid, especially from male academics, regardless of their age or position. Accordingly, some staff members were more inflexible and expected SM to conform, whereas academics who were mothers were more accommodating and understanding. In some instances, staff members have made occasional exceptions on individual cases (e.g. allowing children in the lecture). Yet many universities have tightened regulations and structural changes (e.g. Atherton et al., 2024), which make it difficult for academics to make exceptions. Some universities endeavour to effectively respond to the needs of WAMS and have developed social inclusion policies (Wainwright, 2007; Cambridge, 2021).

Geographical Location

Reay et al. (2005) found that caring and employment responsibilities circumscribe the university choice made by SM. Correspondingly, Wainwright and Marandet (2009) also maintain that many SM expressed the university's geographical proximity as the most important factor in their choice of university rather than academic excellence or choice of subjects. A report published by the National Union of Students, UK (NUS, 2009) found that SM tend not to move to attend university. Given that SM are less mobile, it presents them with a disadvantaged restricted choice of both the institution and course (Wainwright and Marandet, 2009).

Migrant Student Mothers: Affective Experiences

The section above outlined the major issues affecting SP who are considering, or are attending, HE in the UK. While SP may not have migrated to the UK from other countries, MSM have additional experiences to factor into their experience of approaching or attending HE. This section provides an exploration of the experiences of MSM, from their migration trajectory to becoming mothers and students. This is based on an interpretive analysis of the narratives of participants in academic studies (Cambridge, 2018, 2021) while drawing on other current research, and it examines how these experiences may be contrary to, or interwoven within, social responsibility strategies, policies and practices of HE.

Hope

Cambridge (2018, 2021), through an extensive qualitative research, including 21 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in a UK HEI as well as a substantial document analysis, all of which were thematically analysed, unearthed the notion of *Hope* as central to the MSM 'studentship' and 'migration', with seven thematic components: employability, cost, self, fear, God, contagiousness,

and retrospectivity. These themes emerged not only within the individual internalised affects, known as *generalised hope* (Hemmings, 2005), but also within the political and social environment surrounding the individual, known as *objectified particularised hope* (Snyder, 1995).

Hope and Objectifying Employability

The role that employability plays within HE is well documented and initiatives relating to employability have been presented in policy discourse as benefitting both the economy and individuals. For MSM, while not a smooth, hurdle-free journey, there is a strong relationship between employability and education, with the recognition of employability's strong link to both motherhood and migration. The close links between migration and employment (Kaestner et al., 2003), employment and motherhood (Khwaja et al., 2017; Quinn, 2003; Garey, 1999), and employment and education (Marginson, 2013), are clearly evident in the experiences of MSM.

Additionally, the necessity of migration for the sake of employment also influences the type of employment MSM seek. Many MSM accept a limited choice of employment, linked to the traditional role of a mother (Khwaja et al., 2017 such as childcare (Carrim, 2017; Rajadhyaksha and Velgach, 2009). Dyck (2017, p.16) maintained that MM 'presented themselves as potential 'good citizens' but are often precluded from making a full contribution to society, particularly in terms of gaining employment'. Through the vehicle of education, the hope experienced by MSM is not simply for employment but one that realises their freedom to choose their own interests, which are different from the path that the constructed social environment expects of them, acting against the limiting socially constructed reality of themselves as mothers. This demonstrates the strong position of MSM as *agents of change*, through their migration, studentship, employability and motherhood, and their ability to question socially accepted norms (Lisiak, 2017; Erel, 2011), advancing the prospects available to women and their children.

The employability goal is one of the dominating WAMS discourses in the UK (Leathwood and Hyton, 2002; Lane, 2000; Harvey, 2000). MSM wish for better employment comes with the hope that this is exactly what a university degree will provide. Without such a qualification MSM feel that their professional development will be hindered. However, while UK universities are now committed to employability, MSM explained that sometimes employers are more accommodating than their universities (Wainwright and Marandet, 2009), which highlights the invisibility of SM. Thus, although universities seek to attract WAMS as potential students, without an understanding of these stakeholder groups, they may actually act against MSM.

For MSM, employment is not solely an instrumental tool of financial gain but is also part of the hopeful *agents of change*, where children are seen to be

society's future hope. This is related to the role of mothers (Gedalof, 2009; Osgood, 2010) and MM (Dyck, 2017; Erel et al., 2017) in shaping future citizens, and is also linked to the mother's education. SM have also said that studying would positively influence their own children (Mulrenan et al., 2023; Cambridge, 2018, 2021; Wainwright and Marandet, 2009; Quinn, 2003). By acting as a positive role model for their children, as students and consequently gaining better employment, MSM hope to become 'a better mother'. This demonstrates the commitment of MSM to the integration of their children into the host country's society (Erel, 2011) as well as their unique position as an *agent of change* (Lisiak, 2017).

The Cyclical Relationship of Hope and Fear

Leathwood and Hey (2009) stress that researchers should pay further attention to the place of *fear* in education. Commonly for MSM, the main factors attributed to tangible fear are related to life threats causing migration, concerns for their children, and language distress, both due to migration and of being in HE.

The decision of MSM to migrate is woven with hope, even if accompanied with fear or uncertainty. While it is *fear* that caused hope and hence migration, *hope* itself can also produce *fear* (Cambridge, 2018). It is the fear of the kind of life they would face in their country of origin (e.g. the political turmoil) that guided their decision to migrate. While migration that is borne out of choice is believed to offer *freedom* (Willis, 2007), migration caused by fear is lacking that freedom or choice present in other decisions to migrate. Regardless of the existence of freedom, hope still resides, with migration as a beginning of something positive. This was also evident in Dyck's (2017), p. 16) study of migrant mothers' 'hopes and desires for a better life in another country'.

While fear acts as a source of hope for the MSM, it is also hope itself that spawns fear, in a cyclical manner. Accordingly, the hope of migration that was triggered by fear also created fear. Perhaps the most evident fear that comes with migration and HE is that of language difficulties, especially at university level. Quinn et al. (2009) observed the language difficulties of WAMS in the light of WP policy in HE while Erel et al. (2017) underline the important role of language in the often unjustly negative portrayal of MM.

Additionally, MSM speak of their children in a hopeful fashion, albeit entangled with fear within the contextual social reality. While hoping for a better future for their children, MSM also make an explicit reference to 'worry' and the 'gang culture' that is continuously the subject of media and social interest (Hallsworth and Young, 2008; Walker, 2017). Nevertheless, although being aware of the material world around them, MSM take an individualist view of their role as mothers to care for their children, while the future function of the government, corporations, universities and schools within society is not yet a feature of the thought patterns and hope of MSM.

The Cost of Hope

The hope that comes with migration, education and motherhood bears risks on many levels incorporating economic, emotional and practical elements. It is a constant struggle involving all elements of the lives of MSM to achieve hoped-for goals. Education is an expensive commodity, encompassing fees and related expenditure, childcare costs and the opportunity loss of earning, especially during times of hardship (OfS, 2023).

While economic considerations influence the decision to migrate from one country to another, financial considerations also guide the MSM before and while in university. MSM realise the additional financial investment and economic burden of their university education, but it is the lack of money that drives them into education, with the hope that this will be the opening for better employment and earnings. However, while students feel pressure to provide for their family, SP are less able to take on part-time work (OfS, 2023). Some of the MSM are able to access financial aid, such as student loans or grants, though this varies across the MSM status.

Some academics maintain that it is the responsibility of either universities, especially those which attract WAMS, or the government, that encourages WP through their policy agenda and white papers, to provide for these students, though they fail to provide for these in practice. However, MSM accept the personalised discourse of self-responsibility as the ‘reality’ of the pedagogical space. For MSM their roles as mothers and students collide, which may negatively affect their academic success (Cambridge, 2018; Khwaja et al., 2017; Quinn, 2003), experiencing the even more difficult position of being a migrant, in addition to their mothering roles and duties. For many MSM, academic success rests on the kindness of an individual member of academic staff and interpersonal relationships, which can act as a tool that is both practical in terms of everyday study (Wainwright and Marandet, 2009) and hopeful by being a motivational vehicle (Scott et al., 1998), though such concessions can become more bureaucratic, owing to the digitalised nature of university processes.

Other than the financial cost, MSM also experience personalised affective costs, in the form of *guilt*, which is perhaps the most ‘expensive’ cost associated with university studies. Given the MSM migration trajectory, the emotional cost for them is associated with the longing for the family abroad as well as with the *guilt* of struggle to fulfil both university and mothering commitments (Cambridge, 2021). When MSM speak of their forced choice between university and children, they speak of a struggle that goes beyond the practical traditional view of juggling competing demands (Lyonette et al., 2015). It is more than time that is scarce. MSM forgo more than their time or finance, feeling that they are ‘sacrificing’ their children for the sake of their education. The absence of the immediate family affects MSM not only practical way, but also through guilt associated with compromising their ‘own personal standards’ (Baumeister et al., 1994).

Hopeful Self-Actualisation

MSM engagement with HE is through their own personal internalised hope and their decision to enter HE along with their personal circumstances has provided a suitable platform to enrol on a university degree, which points to the university's position as an *agent of change* (Stephens et al., 2008). Self-actualisation does not merely imply the conditions of practical occurrences which allow the feasibility of MSM to enter HE. Rather, it implies a deeper innovative sense of the self. Thus, it is the hope, rather than the purely lived conditions which, through the various experiences, including university, employability and migration, provide for self-actualisation to be manifested, and by this augmenting hope.

MSM self-actualisation is directly linked to the notion of employability, as previously explored. MSM see the need for qualification and better employment, not simply for the financial gain, but also as an extension of themselves and their own identity, emphasising the need to feel and be seen as more valuable and respected by others through their educational achievement. Some go further to question the traditional social and cultural image of themselves as women, wives and mothers (Dyck, 2017), to have financial independence or to feel more confident as people who can 'understand the business'. This is consistent with Lyonette et al. (2015) and others researching the experiences of SP (Moreau and Kerner, 2012; Wainwright and Marandet, 2009; NUS, 2009; Quinn, 2003) in that universities can be seen as a transformative space and as a place of empowerment and self-development. The creation of *pride* through self-actualisation is arguably one of universities' invisible aspects of social responsibility. Accordingly, WP universities need to extend their emphasis on the facilitation of WAMS' achievements, through engagement, retention, progression and attainment (OFFA, 2017a).

Lastly, while studentship can create self-actualisation for MSM, the latter is also born out of migration. MSM often question an individual's expected and accepted social and cultural identities, which are also present in migration trajectories (Cambridge, 2018; Dyck, 2017). MSM see their migration as a breaking away from the constraints of traditional social and cultural constraints and/or from family pressures. Being in a different geographical space allows MSM to form a new identity of their self, and permits them to take control over decision making, without being forced to adhere to past restrictions. The different space is emancipatory as it provides the freedom to be different from the expected self.

Contagious Hope

In Psychology, 'Affect' is the underlying experience of feeling, emotion, attachment, or mood, leading to affective states. Contagious affects have been previously debated among academics and scholars (Gibbs, 2001; Ahmed, 2008;

Tomkins, 1962). Gibbs (2001, p. 8) maintains that ‘affect migrates from body to body’, while Ahmed (2008) explores the notion of affect, in the example of happiness, as contagious. Ergo, the *hope* of one person can lead to the *hope* of another, with a contagious relationship between migration, education and motherhood, making hope itself an *agent of change*. For MSM there is the potential for a kind of active transmissibility that is observed as tangible actions, not simply as pure emotions.

While the MSM perception of migration to the UK is held positively, current media tend to characterise a negative portrayal of migrants (Erel, 2011). Gibbs (2001) perceived electronic social media, such as television and radio, as a contagious ‘body’. Accordingly, the media not only act as amplifiers of affect but also ‘dramatically increase the rapidity’ of affective communication to global dimensions through ‘affective epidemics’ (Gibbs, 2001, p. 1). Therefore, media can also act as an *agent of change*.

The employability agenda, promoted by government policies and also advanced and celebrated by educational institutions (including the university in this study), not only creates a perception of a ‘reality’ for the student participants, but it also generates engagement with their studies. The generally accepted and endorsed ‘good feelings’ of employability are at the centre of participants’ hopefulness, demonstrating the contagiousness of employability. Although Gibbs (2001) describes contagious feelings as ‘affective epidemics’, which hold a negative discourse, denoting malady or plague, for MSM *hope* is, in fact, an eruption of a positive spread of this sort of epidemic. With the sense of hope come positive emotions such as happiness and joy, courage and empowerment.

God and Hope

MSM hope may also be seen as an extension of God or their faith and religious belief, thus enabling success. Thus, it is the belief in God and MSM engagement with religion that act as a motivational tool while in university. Cambridge (2018) highlighted the *fear of emotions* in academia as well as the *fear of religion* in HE. The idea of religion as part of academic business analysis can be ‘controversial’, especially considering current ‘sensationalised media’ attention which tends to synonymise religion with the negative (Vertigans, 2016, p. vii). Redclift (2014, p. 579) shows how notions of radicalisation are typically related to religion and immigration in the media, and point out how government discourse depicts migrant communities, asylum seekers, Muslims, and other ethnic minorities, as the ‘enemies within and without our borders’. Nevertheless, Erel et al. (2017) highlight the untruthful nature of this portrayal, and hence the presence of *God* within SM experience is viewed as an important empowering strength. Moreover, if notions of *faith*, *religion* or *God* are to be divorced from the university space, for their negative image, rather

than incorporated into HE for reasons of positivity, then it could be argued this may contribute to the risk of radicalism.

Strandberg (2011, p. 13) called for an understanding of the *positive* and motivational affect that a spiritual deity or religious belief can have on students. Cambridge (2018, 2021) reveals that *God* and the *religious faith* are clearly visible in relation to MSM lives in their everyday practice and long-term decisions, with the presence of God affecting their decision to enter university and having a continuous presence in their academic success. Therefore, it is evident that the presence of God, faith or religion holds a significant positive value for the MSM in this study, not only within their private lives but also in the university. Yet it is also apparent that other than the provision of a prayer room, there is no real incorporation for such an internalised affect within the university.

The Retrospective Aspect of Hope

Cambridge (2021) showed the *retrospectivity* of hope, whereby past events, which may have been seen in a negative light in the past, turn out to be hopeful and positive with time, and can serve as a medium of hope. For the MSM, as Ahmed (2004) proposed, affective hopeful strength allows for past forms of injustice to disappear. This builds on the work of Watkins' (2010), who discusses the residual effects of that affect and accumulated bodily memory; Tomkins' (1962) who writes about the residue of past experiences *emotional memory*; and Gibbs' (2001) who highlights affective memory as 'the past which has snowballed'.

For MSM, it is that very hope that is accumulated in their affective memory which also reinforces this same hope. For example, in the affective perception of the migration of MSM, hope takes a positive retrospective position, as MSM appreciate that although some may have been forced to leave their country of birth (Willis, 2007), this was nonetheless a positive move. The positivity of migration was revealed later on as it is realised that it is migration that initiated a chain of events that enabled them to have a 'good life', as demonstrated by Cambridge (2018). MSM provide accounts of what was previously seen in a negative light, transformed to be seen as positive, driving them not only to migrate but also to go to university.

Conclusion

This chapter draws on the link between MM and HE; both are perceived as an 'agent of change'. While Erel and Reynolds (2014) and Bork-Hüffer (2022) explain that the popular current media portrayal of immigration and policy debate on migration tends to be negative and migrants depicted as needy. However, Cambridge (2018, 2021), Dyck (2017) and Erel and Acik (2020), see

MSM as having an active positive engagement and impact on bettering the future, not only within the home and the local community, but also within national and transnational levels, an engagement in which studentship plays an active part. Also, observable is the continually augmented link between education and employment. In the context of MSM, while Marginson (2013) recognises the direct link between education and employment, Kaestner et al. (2003) draw the connection between migration and employment, and Khwaja et al. (2017) show the relationship between employment and motherhood. This chapter therefore also makes the important link between the migration, motherhood and education.

MSM experiences have been discussed within the context of government and university strategic policies which do not always translate into actual practices to meet the needs of the students. What is apparent is that at a strategic level, universities may have embraced the WP agenda and integrated this within their employability strategies, while there is some awareness of WAMS by some faculty staff, this stakeholder group and their needs commonly remain invisible.

This chapter underlines the importance of a reciprocal relationship between material experiences and affective understandings. It is argued that for MSM a central theme is the affects of the individual's experiences, especially hope. These ideas are significant in their motivation and achievements relating to mothers through their migration and educational journeys, despite their invisibility in HE, enabling both themselves and their children to occupy a positive place as future citizens and are able to thrive, achieving progression and attainment, that benefits not only themselves but also future generations and society as a whole.

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8

GROWN-UP CONVERSATIONS

Understanding the Experience of Mature Students in Creative Arts Higher Education

Tim Gundry

Introduction

This chapter explores the complex topic of mature students and widening participation in UK higher education (HE). Despite the significant expansion of the university sector over the last decade, with greater access for some, mature student numbers have fallen, and notable inequalities remain evident in many of the performance indicators defined by the Office for Students, UK. This chapter considers some of the context surrounding these learners, before exploring the particular approaches within the creative arts being developed by Arts University Plymouth (AUP), UK. As a small specialist university, we place significant emphasis on a fully inclusive approach to learning and teaching and have developed a distinctive curriculum, underpinned by particular pedagogical principles that support and enable mature students to succeed in HE. Access and participation data over a seven-year reporting period, combined with insight from academic staff and current students, assists in exploring some of the pedagogy of our provision.

Research Methodology

The initial research behind this study was instigated as part of the work towards AUP's Access and Participation Plan (APP) required by the Office for Students in the UK to detail how HE Providers will improve equality of opportunity for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to access, succeed in, and progress from HE (Office for Students, 2018). It is widely acknowledged that mature students are 'disproportionately likely to be from disadvantaged or under-represented groups' (Office for Fair Access, 2017).

Access and Participation, and Graduate Outcomes data from AUP have been analysed and compared with data from the UK sector over a 7-year period from 2017/2018 to 2023/2024. As a small specialist university with approximately 1,000 undergraduate students, there are limitations to the significance of data analysis, so with ethical approval from the University's Research and Innovation Committee, qualitative and narrative enquiry approaches have also been undertaken. A survey issued to the 185 mature students enrolled in 2023–2024 recorded 52 responses (response rate of 28%), and one-to-one interviews were held with six of these respondents. Additional commentary was provided through discussion with a number of staff members who have had direct experience of supporting the learning of mature students at different levels in the University. Semi-structured interviews asked participants to talk freely and in detail about their experiences at the University and their comments have added an important perspective to this study.

Mature Learners in Context

Classed as students over 21 years of age at the beginning of an undergraduate course, mature students in the UK are typically a complex and diverse group of learners, who encompass a wide range of religions, races, educational backgrounds and, most notably, ages. Analysis shows that over half of mature students in the UK are aged between 21 and 24. The heterogeneous nature of this student group poses various challenges, both to institutions and to the Government (MillionPlus, 2018).

Broadly speaking, mature student numbers have been in decline. Various data sources have reported the historic reduction in mature learners in the UK, the total number of mature undergraduate students falling from more than 400,000 in 2010/2011 to fewer than 240,000 in 2017/2018 (Hubble and Bolton, 2021). Despite modest increases in the following 3 years, numbers have subsequently declined, most notably among those aged 30 and over. There has been a particularly steep decline in the numbers of those studying part time, which is of concern. Part-time study allows mature learners the opportunity to access HE while managing other commitments, and therefore plays a significant role in supporting widening participation (MillionPlus, 2018).

Some sources have suggested that the root of this decline can be traced to the funding changes implemented in 2012, which made HE less attractive for mature students (Gongadze et al., 2021). Economic concerns are undoubtedly a factor. Mature students have been described as being more debt averse, with maintenance costs often cited as a concern (MillionPlus, 2018). Importantly, mature students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to react to financial pressures by deciding not to enter HE (Hubble and Bolton, 2021). Even those from more financially comfortable backgrounds can view studying for a degree as a risk, with doubts as to the chances of success and the

long-term career benefits (Moore and Pollard, 2024). This is a particular concern in the Arts, where negative media coverage around the relationship between tuition fees and employability outcomes has almost certainly had an adverse impact on widening participation (Broadhead, 2022).

Sector data suggests that the decline in mature student recruitment is compounded by below average retention. Broadly speaking, mature students are 'more likely than their younger colleagues to drop-out of higher education early' (Bolam and Dodgson, 2003). This is clearly evident in the Access and Participation data reported by the OfS, which shows significant gaps in the continuation and completion rates between young and mature students (Office for Students, 2023).

There are various factors behind this disparity in student retention. Mature students enter HE for a broad range of reasons, and their expectations can be very different from those of their younger counterparts. They can have more complex support needs, and since they are typically more likely to work than those under the age of 21, they are disproportionately affected by the added pressure of work commitments. The increased incidence of parenthood and other caring responsibilities is another key factor (Pearce, 2017).

Gorad et al. (2006) identified a three-part framework to describe the barriers encountered by adult learners accessing and achieving in HE. As Broadhead (2022) notes below, this framework has particular relevance for economically disadvantaged adult learners and those from other underrepresented backgrounds.

- Situational barriers refer to practical challenges, e.g. cost and time commitments and other external factors
- Institutional barriers refer to typical inflexibilities and disincentives such as timetabling structures and support functions that are typically oriented around the needs of younger learners
- Dispositional barriers are particular to the individual learner and can often relate to previous educational experiences or personal issues

Given the challenges in recruiting and retaining mature students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, it is little surprise that numbers have fallen, and that there is a relative lack of published work exploring the impact of widening participation among this group of learners (Gongadze et al., 2021).

It is for this reason that AUP has initiated a research exercise to evaluate our own institutional experience of providing undergraduate Arts education to mature students. We have sought to better understand the complexities of this student group, the particular challenges which they face in our Art and Design context, and how they have been supported to achieve good outcomes.

Creative Education for a Changing World

AUP has a rich tradition of providing lifelong learning opportunities for mature students. From our origins as a traditional art school, through our transition from a vocationally oriented FE College into a specialist arts university, we have always placed significant emphasis on an inclusive approach to access and pedagogic practices that enable mature students from a range of backgrounds to succeed.

AUP's mature student population is typical for HE Providers in England (historically averaging approximately 29%) but against the noted national decline, this has risen over the last two years to 36.4%. Our mature student profile has some link to our geographic location. Mature learners tend to be more selective than 18- or 19-year-olds in their choice of institution, existing commitments in their local region often determining their choice (MillionPlus, 2018). Broadly speaking, the county of Devon in the UK has an ageing population, and the City of Plymouth has historically had high levels of employment in the armed forces and also health and social care. Over the years, we have recruited notable numbers of students who have left these sectors, enrolling on degree courses to pursue changes of career. Our subject specialism is also a factor. As Broadhead notes 'for many social, cultural and practical reasons, some adults choose to study Art and Design later in life' (Broadhead et al., 2019).

Our survey of mature students across our undergraduate provision revealed a number of interesting insights. 52% cited 'personal fulfilment, following a passion' as their primary motivation for enrolling on their degree course at the University, with only 9.6% citing 'to pursue a career change' as their reason. Analysis has revealed we have students who are studying for their second or even third degree. One notable mature student has two previous degrees in science and engineering but with a creative mind has wanted to study a creative arts degree purely for the experience.

This is reflected in the degree choices of mature students, with approximately 63% being enrolled on our three Arts based courses (Craft and Material Practices, Fine Art, and Painting Drawing & Printmaking). 61% of respondents were aged 50+, with a further 17% aged 40–49. Although nationally the largest decline in mature student numbers has been seen in the 30+ age bracket, older students constitute a significant proportion of our mature student cohort. There remains a noted decline in part-time student enrolments with 97% of our undergraduate students enrolling into full-time degrees. This reflects the national picture, where part-time student numbers have plummeted.

For those applicants with the required qualifications and/or skills evidenced through a portfolio of work, the University provides the option of a direct entry into the first year (level 4) of a 3-year degree, a route typically attractive and appropriate to those mature students who have prior educational attainment of professional experience.

For many mature students, however, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, their undergraduate journey begins on our 4-year Extended BA pathway, a supportive multidisciplinary experience that encourages learners to discover their passions and strengths within the creative arts, establishing purpose and direction. Students enrol into a specific named course, but with a largely common initial Level 0 year. This is attractive for mature students without standard entry qualifications, who may not have a suitably developed portfolio of creative work, but have the potential to develop their academic competency. In the seven academic years from 2017/2018 to 2023/2024, approximately 60% of students enrolling on the Extended BA course were classed as mature, significantly higher than our institutional average of approximately 29% over the same period.

The nature of the Extended BA pathway makes it an attractive and accessible route for students from underrepresented backgrounds. Over the same period, an average of 45% of the students enrolling on this course were recorded as being from IMD (Deprivation) Quintile areas 1 and 2, and 45% of the cohort were from POLAR4 (Participation) quintile areas 1 and 2. Over this same period, an average of 26% of the students enrolling on the course were recorded as having only previous life experience or no previous qualifications as their level of educational attainment. Nationally, UK providers record approximately 12.3% of their cohort as being students from areas with the lowest participation. For AUP, this figure is 21.1% (Office for Students, 2023). Our creative undergraduate cohorts are rich in backgrounds from all widening participation categories, but it is where background intersects with age where some of the most interesting insights have emerged.

The academic and demographic profile of this student group presents some obvious challenges. As Broadhead (2022) has noted ‘the academic canon associated with the Arts and Humanities can present barriers to students from underrepresented backgrounds’. The current course leader for the Extended BA programme agrees that this is one of the most significant pedagogical challenges. ‘Awareness of the Arts is often inextricably linked to [social] class. The combination of location and schooling means that many of our students have very limited understanding of Art and limited cultural awareness’ (Markes, 2024). This is one of the key challenges that our Extended BA seems to overcome, equipping students with a broad level of knowledge and understanding that will allow them to situate their emerging creative practice in a broader cultural context, and acquire the language skills to communicate their understanding.

Some of this understanding is achieved through interdisciplinary study, the benefits of which have been well documented, noted by Sperlinger et al. (2018) as providing strong emancipatory and participatory benefits in engaging students from disadvantaged backgrounds. While there are contrasting suggestions that interdisciplinary approaches in Arts and Design can present unwelcome challenges to mature students (Broadhead, 2022), interdisciplinary

thinking is central to the pedagogy of our Extended BA course. The emphasis on exploration, experimentation, and discovery is designed to increase cultural awareness and intellectual curiosity. Importantly, a key objective of the curriculum and delivery is to increase confidence. Our experience has shown that personal and academic confidence are fundamental to student success, particularly among those students who harbour negative experiences from secondary education and who arrive with ‘imposter syndrome’. The safe and supportive learning environment that encourages active participation and peer collaboration, irrespective of age or previous educational background, is fundamental to developing this confidence. The learning and teaching approach places a particular emphasis on the concepts of Belonging, Mattering and Becoming (Morgan and O’Hara, 2023).

Alongside interdisciplinary creative practice, the students receive an integrated programme of academic support covering a range of competencies including reading research skills, critical thinking, and academic writing. It is a tried and tested approach, now in its fourteenth year of delivery, which results in high levels of engagement and satisfaction. In 2023–2024, across the three satisfaction surveys undertaken across the year, our Extended BA cohort recorded the highest response rate (82%) and the highest overall satisfaction score (90.7%) of any course or any level of study. As one anonymous student noted in their feedback in the end of year survey:

I have really loved working with this amazing cohort and doing the Extended Year has really helped me to grow as a person and an Artist to help me use the skills and knowledge I have gained when on my chosen degree.

Notably, the course also demonstrates strong continuation statistics. In 2023–2023, 87% of the students successfully progressed onto their next level of degree study. Importantly, continuation rates are higher for mature students, with 91.3% successfully progressing that year. The increasing incidence of mental health issues has been reported across the sector and is one of the most notable factors driving poor continuation and completion rates in the UK. Despite the various situational and dispositional challenges described earlier, it seems that mature students also bring a marked level of drive and commitment to their studies and a resilience that enables them to manage their competing responsibilities, and overcome some of their personal barriers to learning. The current course leader for the Extended BA course commented:

I would say that most of our mature students on Extended BA have issues that impact their learning. In 2023–2024, 50% of our mature students had a declared disability at enrolment. There is also a significantly gendered dimension. We have a lot of men who are ex-military who have physical and/or mental health issues. We have a lot of older women who have various

caring responsibilities which adversely affect their attendance and engagement. Even those who can juggle these are sometimes having to contend with the effects of the menopause which can be genuinely debilitating. Importantly, while these mature students might have more to contend with, they are generally more willing and determined to try, they have more of a desire to overcome personal and mental health issues.

(Markes, 2024)

With such strong recruitment and retention of mature students from widening participation backgrounds through our Extended BA pathway, we have been interested to explore the progress and achievement of these students into their undergraduate degrees. Nationally, over seven academic years from 2016/2017 to 2021/2022, the Office for Students reported a notable gap in continuation rates between young and mature students. In 2021–2022, the continuation rate for young students was 89.8%, while for mature students, this figure was 80.5%.

At AUP, however, this picture is different. While a gap has been evident in some years, it has been much narrower than the national picture, and in 2021–2022, our mature students showed higher continuation rates 87.8% mature vs 86.4% young. This notable difference is evident in Figure 8.1. While the comparatively small sample size can result in significant variations year on year, the trend in contrast to the national picture is clearly evident.

Despite these broadly encouraging continuation rates, which show a narrowing of the gap between young and mature students, it has been noted that there are often complexities in the experience of older learners who can face various challenges related to identity and belonging (Gongadze et al., 2021), factors which frequently impact on their ability to persist with their studies. Mature students often feel as nervous as their younger counterparts for a range

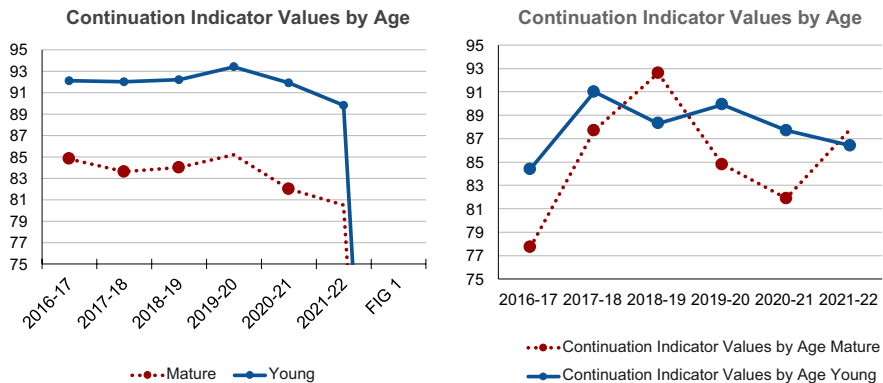


FIGURE 8.1 Comparison of continuation rates between mature and young students: All registered HE Providers vs AUP (Office for Students, 2022).

of reasons such as studying for the first time since leaving school, wondering if they will ‘fit in’ and whether or not they will be liked by the cohort. Often reluctant or unable to participate in social aspects of the University, typically oriented around younger learners, mature students can feel separate from their peers. These feelings can be more acute for older mature students as the culture and generational distances increase. As Pearce (2017) notes: ‘being as old as some of the staff, and having children as old as classmates are quite clear markers of difference, which will present challenges to integration’.

This has been a noted factor at our University, particularly among those subject areas (e.g. Animation and Games, Film and Screen Arts) which typically attract younger learners. A respondent in our survey, asked to comment on the most difficult and least enjoyed aspect of their experience noted: ‘not being able to communicate with the younger generation’ (Anon, 2024). This appeared to be a common theme in a number of responses and another student in one of the follow-up interviews explained:

I had to switch course from Film and Screen Arts, to Fine Art. As the oldest student there, I was left out of all group projects, and it seemed no one was sure how to talk to me. They didn’t put much effort into talking with me or getting to know me.

(Anon, 2024)

While not typical of feedback received, this and other comments received in student surveys, prompted careful consideration of the particular needs of mature students and how these are reflected in our approaches to fully inclusive learning and teaching.

The concept of ‘Belonging’ is a notable area of focus within the HE sector. As Morgan and O’Hara (2023) note ‘Belonging, Mattering and Becoming are instrumental in fostering self-actualisation and self-efficacy in learners’.

- **Belonging:** When students feel a genuine sense of belonging within an educational community, they are more likely to become open to self-discovery and growth, to believe that they have the intelligence and ability to succeed.
- **Mattering:** When students feel that they matter, and that their experiences and ideas are valued, they are more likely to overcome their imposter syndrome and develop self-efficacy.
- **Becoming:** This represents the process of self-actualisation, where students evolve, adapt, and grow, developing resilience, recognising the perseverance and passion involved in succeeding and achieving.

These concepts have been fully embraced in the pedagogical principles of the University, encouraging course teams to recognise themselves as being

responsible for the cultivation of transformative learning environments that provide a space for students of all ages and backgrounds to thrive Morgan and O’Hara (2023).

Alongside these principles, a group of students, in conjunction with the Students Union at AUP, have been encouraged to create a Mature Student Society, open to all students from all courses who categorise themselves as mature at the point of entry. The Society exists to provide a supportive and collaborative network and has proved a great success, helping to retain at least one known student who was considering withdrawing as she felt she did not fit in with her course cohort. The Society played a key role in the dissemination of our survey, and a number of students came forward to contribute narrative commentary to the exercise.

Considering the framework of barriers for mature learners, as outlined by Gorad et al. (2006) and expanded by Broadhead (2022), a central question in the survey enquired about the challenges encountered during the course of their studies. The response breakdown is shown in Figure 8.2.

Although rarely mentioned in much of the cited literature, the challenges with IT and Digital Literacy are a key issue for many mature students. Survey comments regarding the worst/least enjoyed aspect of the learning experience included: ‘Feeling stupid. My technology skills were outdated, and accessibility was a big issue’ (Anon, 2024). Digital literacy has become a widely discussed topic in the HE sector, and is regarded as integral to personal, academic and professional development. Students who develop digital capabilities are more effective in their study and more employable once they graduate (Advance HE, n.d.), and as such this has been identified as a key area of development for the University. Alongside our digital literacy framework, one of the

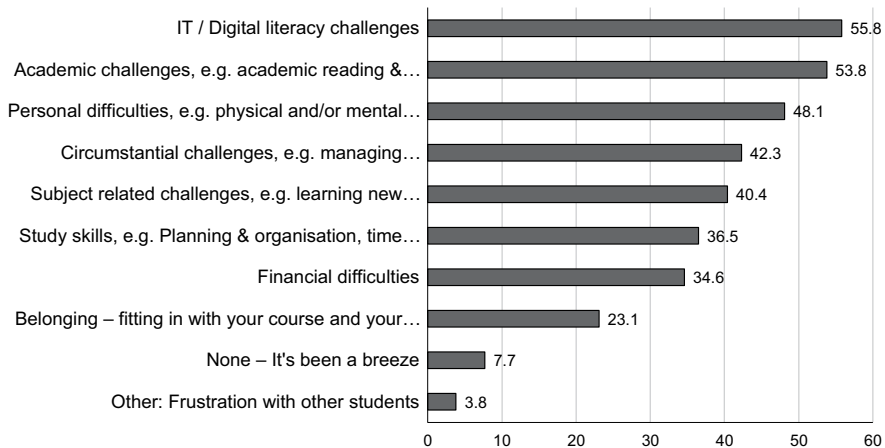


FIGURE 8.2 Analysis of survey responses (Arts University Plymouth, 2024).

underpinning attribute sets within our common unit curriculum, AUP has developed a number of initiatives to support students with the development of their digital literacy skills. Typically, well attended by our increasing number of mature students, our Digital Skills School takes place prior to the commencement of the academic year, giving students the opportunity to acquire basic computing skills and build their confidence before the course content starts. This is one of many initiatives developed and delivered by our Digital Education team.

For the most part our survey respondents report feeling well supported, with particularly positive feedback regarding our student experience functions such as the Library, Academic Skills and Student Support. Although we are a small university with limited resources, our size is a strength, allowing us to provide a level of personal support for individual learning needs. One respondent commented: ‘I have felt fully supported, everyone I have encountered has been really accepting, friendly and happy to help - staff and students’ (Anon, 2024) This commentary echoes the typical feedback that is recorded in other student voice mechanisms. In the recent National Student Survey, UK (NSS), 2024, where the University was ranked the top arts university in the UK in almost every category, and satisfaction scores are highest amongst those aged 31+. We have developed a learning environment where mature learners feel that they matter.

There are, however, issues evident in some of the commentary. While some respondents reported finding tutors ‘very helpful and understanding about work commitments’ (Anon, 2024), others felt that they were in a minority on their course and felt they were not treated in accordance with their age. One student reported: ‘Good support with IT, study skills and academic challenges. Lack of support, however, with circumstantial challenges; poor communication regarding timetabling and advance notice of sessions and general lack of understanding regarding the commitments of life outside of university’ (Anon, 2024). Some of these institutional barriers can be difficult to navigate and resolve. We have had to acknowledge that curriculum structures and delivery models do not always provide the flexibility that some mature students require.

When considering the experience that mature students bring to their studies, the majority of the respondents (85%) felt that their life experience before coming to university has helped them in HE study. As noted previously, mature students and their prior experiences have been known to positively contribute to group dynamics. ‘They bring an attitude of hope and resilience that can often rubs off on the younger students’ (Markes, 2024). One respondent reported feeling able to bring ‘Maturity, discipline, logic, nutritional advice, personal and philosophical perspectives’ (Anon, 2024), another replied: ‘A wider perspective, emotional maturity, life experience, ability to self-manage & take personal responsibility, ability to work in a productive way as part of a team’. Many of our course leaders and lecturers attest to the view that when

mature students build upon their extended life experience in discussions, presentations, and other forms of group work, younger students benefit from the enriched learning environment (MillionPlus, 2018). As O’Shea (2018) notes, there is a need to recognise ‘older learners not as a group that is lacking but rather one that is replete with particular forms of experiential and embodied knowledge’.

The success of our approach to providing lifelong learning for widening access and mature students in the UK is ultimately measured by the OfS indicators. As noted previously, AUP performs well against Access and Continuation measures, and similarly positive performance is evident in our Completion statistics. Latest data shows that the national completion rate for mature students is 80%, whereas AUP is able to report a completion rate of 83.3% (Office for Students, 2023). This has improved significantly in recent years, now almost equalling the completion rate for our younger students (84.7%).

For some of our mature students the conventional notion of attainment, a ‘good degree’ is not important; they may be studying as a hobby, some having retired from their careers; they are often self-funded and some completing the degree for personal enjoyment or just to satisfy a long-held ambition. In terms of the degree outcomes that completing students achieve, there is across the sector an acknowledged attainment gap between young and mature students with older learners being less likely to achieve the HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) definition of a Good honours Degree (First Class and Upper Second). At AUP, however, there is no such attainment gap. Indeed, for the last three academic years of reported data, the attainment of mature students has exceeded that of younger students. Figure 8.3 shows our attainment profile against the average for all registered English HE Providers.

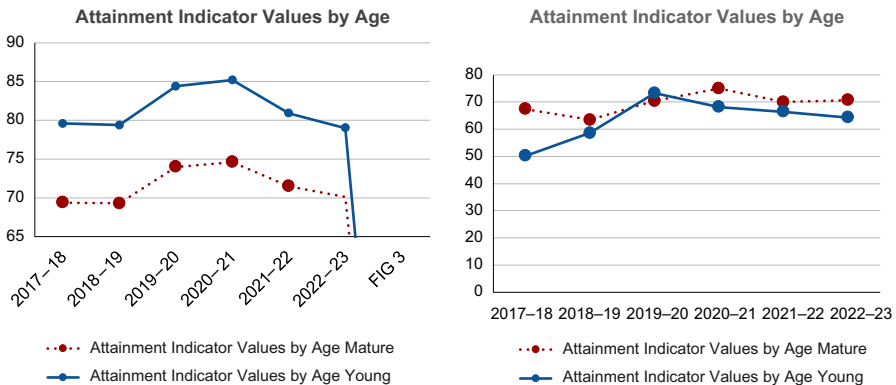


FIGURE 8.3 Attainment indicator values by age: All registered English HE Providers vs Arts University Plymouth (Office for Students, 2023).

A particularly positive trend is also evident in our Progression data, which shows that our mature students have higher rates of progression with a gap of *minus* 15.2% compared to our young students. This compares to a national gap of 2.8%. Evidence has shown that mature students are often stronger candidates for highly skilled/managerial/professional employment once they graduate. A higher number also progress into postgraduate study, also regarded as a positive progression outcome. 2020–2021 Graduate Outcomes UK survey data show 84.8% positive progression for mature students. In contrast, progression for younger students in the same period was 60.6% (Office for Students, 2022) (Figure 8.4).

Against all of the Office for Students indicators for the measurement of Access and Participation, the analysis of our data for mature students shows that AUP is succeeding in its stated mission to provide fair and equal access and lifelong learning opportunities for mature students, regardless of their background.

While feedback received from students reveals that there is still work to be done in certain areas, we can have confidence in the effectiveness of our approach.

In 2023, the University launched ‘Teaching for Our Time’, an essential strand of our strategic plan ‘Creative Education for a Changing World’, which captures the core principles that define our approach and method of teaching (Arts University Plymouth, 2024). Centred around three core principles of *Kindness*, *Authenticity* and *Fulfilment*, our pedagogical principles are concerned with establishing a dialogue between the individual and the wider world and providing a relatable and ethical model for students and staff. We recognise the need to provide the space, time, and resources to figure out what creativity might mean, and to nourish and sustain our students to thrive, embracing meaningful lifelong learning and the personal fulfilment that it brings. The demonstrable success of our mature students is a testament to these pedagogical principles.

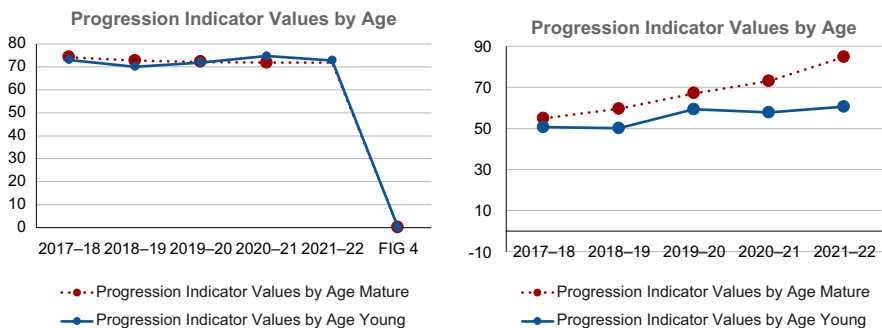


FIGURE 8.4 Progression indicator values by age: All registered English HE Providers compared with Arts University Plymouth (Office for Students, 2022).

Conclusion

AUP is committed to fair access and widening participation and aims to recruit students from all ages and backgrounds. We believe that a student community that reflects our society as a whole will benefit everyone. Maximising the participation of mature students in HE is fundamental to increasing social mobility. There are also strong economic arguments for ensuring that HE remains open and attractive to all age groups (MillionPlus, 2018). Since many of the workplaces and careers of the future require HE qualifications, it is vital that universities provide and support opportunities for older learners to develop their knowledge and skills.

Much of the literature around the experiences of mature students in HE is focused on the issues and challenges. Described as a ‘discourse of disadvantage’ (Woodfield, 2012), this focus on the problematic often ignores the resources that older learners usually possess, and the enrichment they bring to the HE learning community (O’Shea, 2018). We welcome and value the numerous positive contributions that mature students have brought to our University and reject the deficit model so often ascribed to students from widening participation backgrounds. As Brown (2021) notes ‘the sheer courage of tackling studying when you are atypical should be celebrated’.

Through our Extended BA pathway, we have created a route for mature students from a range of backgrounds to access HE and progress into meaningful lifelong learning. Across our undergraduate provision, we have welcomed mature students and developed distinctive pedagogies funded on key principles to support their learning. The outstanding rates of progression are evidence of our success in providing transformational learning opportunities that enable mature students to succeed in education and realise their creative and professional potential.

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9

LIFE EXPERIENCE & KNOWLEDGE CONSTRUCTION

Mature Students as Returners to Higher Education

Nick Papé, Rahaman Hasan and Nazim Uddin

Introduction

Can learning be encouraged through autonomy and responsibility? Why is teaching adults different and requiring special skills of the teacher? What parts do societal and cultural influences play? How can educators address the benefits of enabling autonomous tertiary learning, so critical in adult learners (Zimmerman, 2002), following on from general classic secondary teaching¹? How can educators address the seeming tension between self-directed autonomous construction of knowledge and scaffolding knowledge provided by a tutor-led contexts? What part does the tutor–student relationship play? Some answers can be found in this chapter, which will explore the construction of knowledge, defined as the process through which learners actively create meaning and understanding by integrating new information with their existing experiences and cultural contexts (Illeris, 2018), for independent adult learners who are linguistically and culturally diverse. We propose a multi-focus response to these questions. We examine Vygotsky’s use of the concept of social situations of development to investigate language, thought and concept formation (Bandura, 1986; Vygotsky, 1998). Drawing on sociocultural studies based on Vygotsky’s work, including our own research in two, often contiguous fields of second language learning and literacy, we describe how Vygotsky’s theoretical framework and methodological approach influence our own teaching. We conclude by examining how the sociocultural tradition can help us meet the challenge of providing effective education for mature students.

Andragogy

Andragogy refers to the principles and practices of adult education (Knowles, 1980); there can be considered two main approaches to andragogy that are commonly used, student-centric and sociocultural construction, the latter focusing on how learning occurs through social interaction, cultural context and the shared construction of knowledge. Both student-centric and sociocultural approaches to andragogy are relevant to mature students returning to higher education. Mature students may have different motivations for returning to education, including career advancement, personal development or social engagement. They may also face various challenges of work and family responsibilities, financial constraints or academic preparation. Therefore, a student-centric approach can help educators to identify and address the specific needs and goals of each student, while a sociocultural approach can help educators to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment that respects and values the diversity of learners (Zimmerman and Schunk, 2011).

Constructivism, within the context of educational philosophy, emphasises that learners are not passive recipients of information but active participants in the learning process. It holds that learners construct knowledge by engaging with and interpreting new information through the lens of their existing experiences, beliefs and cultural contexts (Duffy and Jonassen, 2013). This approach shifts the focus from traditional teacher-centred instruction, where knowledge is transmitted, to learner-centred methods that encourage critical thinking, exploration and collaboration. Constructivism also recognises the social dimension of learning, where interactions with peers, teachers and the environment contribute to meaning-making. This perspective has twofold consequences: it prioritises the learner's experience and process of understanding over merely delivering content and it acknowledges that knowledge is not fixed or universal but is subjective and context-dependent, shaped by the interplay between individual cognition and social influences (Bruner, 1986). Firstly, there is focus on the learner in thinking about learning and not the subject being taught and secondly, there is no knowledge independent of the meaning attributed to the experience (i.e., constructed) by the learner (Hein, 1991), as learning is seen as an 'active participation of the learner with the environment' (Hein, 1991, p. 06). Vygotsky's (1978) theories posit that learning is highly dependent on social interaction and language and links social and psychological analysis through two different dimensions: firstly, how social and psychological elements are connected; secondly, the way in which the social world is theorised and arranged during academic study (Daniels, 2005). These two dimensions are underpinned by the well-known propositions of the zone of proximal development and the general genetic law of cultural development (Daniels, 2005). Lave and Wenger (1991) further researched these concepts, developing ideas of cultural and societal interpretations and suggesting that

social transformation involves ‘learning beyond the context of pedagogical structuring’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 48) by addressing the conflicting nature of social practice. Lave identifies the basic unit of analysis for situated action as ‘the activity of persons acting in [the] setting’ (Lave, 1988); this unit being the relation of the individual to the environment.

Learning as a Pathway

Learning is a pathway to self-development and self-actualisation (Maslow, 1970; Taormina and Gao, 2013), offering intrinsic rewards through recognition and personal development, which situates it within Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. In some cases, this process may progress to self-actualisation, influenced by the learner’s broader aspirations and educational goals, as it inherently engages intrinsic motivation and fulfils personal needs. The significance of self-concept development in individuals suggests that when learners understand their strengths and weaknesses and believe in their ability to improve as they construct knowledge, they develop a positive self-perception. This personal development approach (Menon, 2002; McAdams and Olson, 2010) has merit and assesses student reflections (Bailey and Unwin, 2008; Perrone et al., 2009) on their understanding against the advised criteria. Training provides for learning in three main areas: skills acquisition (Wismath et al., 2015), academic learning and personal development (Robins, 2001; Segers et al., 2008). Skills development is given a high priority with entry-level students, focusing on particular skills or approaches that are beneficial at various stages of their programmes. The assimilation or learning of new skills depends on inherent factors, including how these skills align with sociocultural norms, which encompass the shared values, behaviours and expectations within a society or community. These norms influence how individuals perceive and approach learning, shaping their openness to new methods and their readiness to assume responsibility for personal development and change. The framework of the course and curriculum is specified by the regulating body and mediated through the tutoring process. Spronken-Smith et al. (2015, p. 21) propose a number of opportunities for students’ personal development horizons including ‘authentic learning tasks; the advance of critical thinking skills; interaction with teachers; evolving practical skills; experiencing different cultures and; lifestyle and social experiences’. Once different characteristics of emotional and societal growth are deemed important, it is then essential to create learning tasks that will allow learners to develop those proficiencies (Huitt and Monetti, 2017). The same is true for the development of self-regulation, ethical character or any number of other chosen objectives. Literature reviewed includes proposals that students undertaking studies and integrating the concepts into their clinical experience as work experience were likely to lead to individual change (Beisser, 1970) and personal development (McAdams and Olson, 2010).

CASE STUDY 1

Jennifer, a Year 4 BA student aged 36 years, was able to reflect how her learning had been influenced by personal problems in her family life and hence personal development. She stated it was important for her to succeed with assignments and she had a high commitment to study despite the course providing an increased pressure of work. As she built assertiveness, she was able to reflect differently on her personal life. She reflected on how a change of tutor, who employed different educational approaches, had influenced her learning. She recognised a parallel between her desire to please her tutor, whom she perceived as a parental figure and her experiences of seeking approval from a parent. She recognised her development towards autonomous learning while still appreciating that the closeness of her relationship with her tutor facilitated her learning. When reflecting on theories and work on the course she stated she was intellectually stimulated with an increase of self-esteem. Finally, she stated she has come to understand how classroom discussions with peers, as well as the number within the cohort, facilitated her learning.

In this case study, a number of features are apparent; the student is able to reflect on her development which is concomitant to her learning; she came to understand how she dealt with parental issues through the student–tutor dyad as well as group experiences. That interplay between and use of different types of teaching strategies (Entwistle, 1988; Kirschner et al., 2006) enhanced the students’ learning experiences, which was especially important where learning involved personal development and a greater understanding of self (Beisser, 1970; Ginsburg-Block et al., 2006; Daniels et al., 2007; Mackey, 2008). This matching of tutoring strategies to facilitating factors, which could be understood from students’ perceptions, must remain part of the foci of teaching.

Autonomy vs Learning from More Experienced Other

The authors propose the socio-constructivist theories of Vygotsky and their application to understanding how a student might construct knowledge, throughout the learning cycle of Higher National and BA courses in the UK, can help explain the seeming ambivalence between autonomy in learning and key Vygotskian concepts of scaffolded learning.

Uddin (2021) asserts an interesting perspective that positions students as active agents in constructing their own learning, noting in this context Wood et al. (1976) who propose the educator’s role primarily becomes that of scaffolding students’ knowledge-building process. However, a significant challenge

arises regarding how an educator can accurately determine the existing knowledge of a student.

Mature students are adult self-directed learners, whatever previous experiences they might bring to the classroom. This is highlighted in research surveys (Papé et al., 2022; Uddin et al., 2023) in which mature learners state many times they do not wish to be treated as children, nor do they like it. They recognise that unknown facts have to be shared and content developed, which can then be assimilated in ways that make sense to their understanding and relevance to their social and cultural lives. Learning experientially is highly preferred both in and out of classroom, role playing and case studies followed by visiting specialist lecturers or visits to appropriate industries help with this understanding. Task-oriented problem-solving preferences (Wood et al., 1976) enable comprehension of reasons and rationales, which provide stimulus and determination to succeed and apply to sought lifestyle changes.

The tension between self-directed autonomous construction of knowledge and scaffolding knowledge by the more experienced other can be addressed by finding a balance between the two approaches.

The following is a case study illustrating how an adult student on Year 2 of an HND in Business Management (Entrepreneurship) course can benefit from andragogy involving constructivism:

Case Study: Anwar is a 38-year-old adult student in his second year of a Higher National Diploma (HND) in Business Management (Entrepreneurship). He has much practical experience in the business field, having worked in various managerial roles for the past few years. Anwar has always been motivated to start his own business and sees this course as a means to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills. He is able to draw upon his prior knowledge and experiences, enabling him to connect theory with practice. As a result, Anwar becomes an active participant in his learning, developing critical thinking skills and gaining a deeper understanding of the concepts taught.

Anwar has the freedom to explore his own interests and set goals that align with his entrepreneurial aspirations. By taking ownership of his learning journey, he becomes more motivated and engaged, leading to increased retention and application of knowledge.

Tutor–Student Relationships

According to Papé and Papé (2017), research consistently highlights the tutor–student relationship as a central theme, as expressed by students themselves. This finding aligns with the sociocultural constructivist perspective, wherein the relationship enables learning within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978; Vygotsky, 1998). Although case-study research (Yin, 2003)

does not provide conclusive evidence of the relationship's significance, it does offer valuable data that can shed light on the matter. Engaging with the tutor and experiencing the boundaries within the tutor–student relationship are perceived as essential aspects of the learning process (Sinsheimer, 2007). Students express a need for an environment that nurtures and challenges them simultaneously (Gardener and Lane, 2010). This highlights the importance of fostering a supportive and stimulating learning environment where students can feel both encouraged and extended to reach their potential.

The following case study highlights the significance of supportive relationships with the course tutor and a dedicated personal tutor in enhancing the learner's educational journey.

CASE STUDY 2

Case Study: The adult learner, Constantin, embarked on the HND Hospitality Management course with the ambition to advance his career in the hospitality industry. Despite some industry experience, he initially struggled to adapt to the academic environment. However, with the support of his course tutor and his personal tutor, he found himself flourishing. The tutor played a pivotal role in fostering a positive and stimulating relationship with Constantin. He provided regular feedback, identified areas for improvement and offered valuable resources for independent study. By catering to Constantin's learning style and acknowledging his prior experience, the tutor empowered him to overcome challenges and encouraged his active participation in class discussions. Through regular one-on-one sessions, she provided guidance on time management, study techniques and emotional well-being, although was not able to offer academic advice. The personal tutor's empathic and understanding nature created a safe space for Constantin to express his concerns and receive personalised advice, ultimately enhancing his learning experience. Constantin's supportive relationships with his tutors not only facilitated his academic growth but also boosted his confidence and motivation. These relationships fostered an environment where he felt comfortable seeking help, sharing ideas and engaging with his peers.

Conclusion

By incorporating sociocultural, autonomous and interpersonal developmental concepts and processes, teachers can enhance their effectiveness in the classroom. This approach fosters knowledge construction by empowering self-directed learners to take ownership of their education. The creation of an inclusive and equitable learning environment that values diversity, promotes

collaboration and encourages active engagement enables students to construct knowledge actively and develop critical skills necessary for success in the 21st century. By adopting these strategies, teachers can play a transformative role in shaping the educational experiences of their students and preparing them for a future that values and respects the diverse strengths and interests of all individuals.

Note

- 1 General classic secondary teaching refers to the traditional, teacher-centred approach commonly used in secondary education, which prioritises standardised curricula, passive knowledge acquisition and exam-focused outcomes. This model often contrasts with the learner-driven, experiential and reflective approaches required in tertiary education, particularly for adults who benefit from autonomy and the integration of their prior experiences into the learning process (Merriam and Baumgartner, 2020).

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10

WIDENING ACCESS

Indigenous Australian Mature-Aged Students in Higher Education

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Introduction

Higher education is crucial in improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's (hereafter respectfully referred to as indigenous peoples) socioeconomic status (Grant-Smith and Irmer 2022). Higher levels of education can contribute to access to better social benefits and improve health and wellbeing (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW] 2023). The enhancement of social capital, connectedness, skills, and employment outcomes through adult learning can have an indirect positive impact on both physical and mental wellbeing (AIHW and National Indigenous Australians Agency 2024). In recent years, there has been an improvement in the enrolment and retention of Indigenous students in tertiary education, with an increase in enrolment to double (from 11,800 to 24,000) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022). However, Indigenous students are still unrepresented in higher education, representing just 2.4% of the total enrolments (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022).

Many Indigenous people in Australia have had traumatic experiences in the education system. 'Educative trauma' is often marked by perpetuating the historical practices of racism, assimilation, discrimination (Anderson et al. 2022; Anderson et al. 2024), and deficit narratives. We know that Indigenous Australians are less likely than non-Indigenous Australians to pursue higher education (Universities Australia 2020). In addition, Indigenous students are more inclined to be mature age (aged 25 and older) compared with their non-Indigenous peers (Behrendt et al. 2012). Indigenous older students frequently struggle to integrate family and community commitments with academic demands, making success in higher education even more difficult (Hill et al. 2020).

Australian universities receive financial incentives based on the number of higher degrees by research (HDRs) completed; this doubles when an Indigenous HDR graduates (Grant-Smith and Irmer 2022). The above-mentioned financial scheme motivates universities to create strategies to attract Indigenous HDR students. However, the support Indigenous HDR students receive at university ultimately determines success or failure. The financial incentive connected to Indigenous HDR completions may explain the high rates of university attrition among Indigenous HDR students. Such a reality raises the question of how universities should broaden access for mature Indigenous students without jeopardising completion outcomes.

While the literature extensively addresses the fundamental issues faced by Indigenous students in higher education, there is a shortage of research that explicitly examines the unique experiences of mature Indigenous students. In this chapter, we explore some of the main challenges Indigenous mature-aged students face when they engage in higher education. The data informing this chapter is based on data from a larger study (see Pham et al. 2025). However, in this chapter, we are focusing only on Indigenous mature-aged students who have completed university degrees.

Mature-Aged Indigenous Students in Australian Higher Education

Students from Indigenous communities are typically the first in their families to attend university, come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and live in remote places (Plater et al. 2015). Australian Government, Tertiary Collection of Student Information (TCSI) (2022) notes a significant female presence, with women constituting 69.1% of Indigenous enrolment in all levels of courses and within a broad field of education in 2019.

There appears to be a delay in terms of when some Indigenous students start university. This delay has been visible in the statistics since 2011 (Pechenkina and Anderson 2011). In 2011, half of all Indigenous students at universities were 25 years or older (Pechenkina and Anderson 2011). The Australian Government has introduced several initiatives aimed at increasing the participation and engagement of Australian Indigenous mature-aged students in higher education. Despite these efforts, the 2020 Closing the Gap Report identified ongoing challenges, particularly the age profile of Indigenous university entrants as a significant barrier to progress. To address these issues, the Australian Universities Accord Final Report (Australian Government, Department of Education 2024a) called for expanding opportunity to all (Recommendation 1), including participation targets for students from under-represented backgrounds to achieve participation parity by 2050, linking these new attainments with Closing the Gap targets (Recommendation 10), and

outreach programmes to build the aspiration and capacity of students from underrepresented groups to participate in tertiary education. Plater et al. (2015) highlight the need to support mature-aged Indigenous students because of barriers faced at a younger age which prevented participation directly out of high school. We acknowledge that obstacles persist at any age which can hinder the engagement and success of Indigenous students. This chapter focuses on five factors previously identified (see Pham et al. 2025) to support Indigenous university students' completion of a university degree. Pham et al. (2025) proposed a Higher Education Success Factor (HESF) model to examine the social determinants impacting Australian university students' completion. The HESF model includes five factors, including social environment, physical environment, economic conditions, health and wellbeing, and individual characteristics. We will unpack each of the five factors in relation to Indigenous mature-aged students; however, in the next section, we explain our methodology.

Methodology

We are a team of Indigenous researchers from Walpiri and Murinpatha peoples of the Northern Territory, Beausoleil First Nations from Canada, Diaguita First Nation from Chile, and a non-Indigenous researcher who have completed a larger study focusing on who completes university in Australia with over 2500 participants. From that data we also identified, from over 300 Indigenous university graduates, what factors contributed to completing university (Pham et al. 2025). This chapter is influenced by the above-mentioned paper but focuses only on mature-aged Indigenous graduates and unpacks the five factors influencing¹ mature-aged Indigenous graduates, whereas the previous research looked at all Indigenous graduates aged 18 and older, and only discussed the three most impact factors from the Indigenous graduates' perspective.

For this study, the research participants include 271 Indigenous graduates aged 25 and above who completed a university degree (i.e., Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral degrees) between 2018 and 2022. In this study and the larger study mentioned above, we employed a mixed-method approach which incorporated both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Creswell (1999) describes mixed-method studies as where the researcher integrates both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis within a single study. The descriptive quantitative data was used to identify characteristics, frequencies, trends, and categories as it is an appropriate approach to understand the participant demographics and the trends they engage in higher education (McCombes 2023). Qualitative data focuses on individuals' lived experiences, capturing the depth and comprehensive nature of these experiences, and holds substantial potential for revealing intricacies and nuances (Miles et al. 2020). Our qualitative data consisted of open-ended responses

from our survey, which we then analysed to comprehend the factors influencing student completion.

An online survey using Qualtrics survey tool was designed and developed by the research team based on our research aim. We engaged and contracted Qualtrics to recruit participants. The panellist (participants) recruited by Qualtrics are solely for corporate and academic market research. The survey comprised four sections:

- 1 Demographic questions (i.e., age, ethnic group, gender).
- 2 A five-point Likert-scale asking graduates to rank their level of agreement from strongly agree to strongly disagree (i.e., strongly agree – agree – neutral – disagree – strongly disagree) on questions about their social environment, physical environment, economic conditions, health and wellbeing, and individual characteristics.
- 3 Ranking questions, where participants were asked to rank the three most important impact factors.
- 4 Open-ended questions asking graduates about the challenges students experienced during their study; how they overcame those challenges and completed their study. We also asked if graduates experienced any financial hardship and how did they overcome those hardship. The Indigenous support unit plays a crucial role in supporting Indigenous students in Australia, so we ask if there is any Indigenous support unit at the university where they completed the degree and if they found the support they need at the Support Unit.

Data analysis was performed to analyse the descriptive demographic data. The demographic variables of Indigenous graduates included age, gender, enrolment status (e.g., full-time, part-time), living conditions, financial conditions (i.e., how students paid their tuition fees and living cost during their studies, including any financial hardship), the Indigenous Support Unit, and university degree completion. A quantitative approach using a confirmatory factor analysis was performed to validate the HESF model. Qualitative data (i.e., open-ended questions) were imported into NVivo for thematic analysis to understand the reasons behind Indigenous graduates' challenges that influenced their university completion.

Results and Findings

In this section, we unpack the five factors that influence Indigenous mature-aged students' completion through the previously identified five factors in the HESF model (Pham et al. 2025) to draw out unique concerns and/or needs of Indigenous graduates. The factors include social environment, physical environment, economic conditions, health and wellbeing, and individual characteristics.

Social Environment Factor

The social environment in the HESF model ‘refers to broad education values, policies, and practices within an institution, including the university learning environment, course or unit design, and academic and administrative staff professionalism, and institutional support network/units’ (Pham et al. 2025: 4). Our study found that the social environment factor influenced mature-aged Indigenous students in a myriad of aspects in their student life. The social environment such as university learning environment, learning facilities, unit designs, academic and administrative staff, support networks, and peers could be the support factor, but also the impact factor which influences their completion.

Indigenous graduates agreed that the university learning environment where they studied was inclusive and respected cultural values, as a male graduate mentioned that ‘the inclusive environment allows me to experience different cultural values.’ Another female graduate added that ‘the inclusive university environment will provide me with more learning opportunities and stable knowledge storage.’ Moreover, Indigenous graduates also believed that a good learning environment is a secured one where they feel safe and protected, where a good learning environment influenced their emotions and learning outcomes. For instance, a female graduate said: ‘a good learning environment can protect people from outside interference,’ while another male graduate explains that ‘it is very important to have a good study atmosphere, which contributes to my study.’ Expressions such as ‘environment impacts learning,’ ‘environment affect my mood,’ ‘learning environment affects my results,’ ‘good environment is good mood,’ or ‘for better study’ recur in the graduates’ responses.

Academic lecturers, administrative staff, and support networks play a critical role in supporting Australian graduates’ success. Our findings determine the influence of these components on Indigenous graduates’ completion, so as to influence their peers and peer-learning. For instance, a male graduate said that: ‘good support network is everything.’ Another female graduate emphasised that ‘I need to be supported and valued.’ Other graduates added that ‘having a supportive environment can help,’ or ‘having a supportive environment to assist through stressful times.’ The support from teachers and peers recurred in Indigenous graduates’ responses and was highlighted in the following examples: ‘you need help from friends for assignments and revision,’ ‘support from friends,’ ‘[we need] teacher support.’

Overall, Indigenous graduates expressed their need of ‘social support,’ including a wide range of support networks, such as research support network, Indigenous support units, government support, as well as support from their teachers and peers.

Physical Environment Factor

The physical environment in the HESF model was expanded from the housing and neighbourhood to incorporate institutional facilities and learning resources, along with living situations and safe communities (Pham et al. 2025). Our findings indicate that the learning facilities, including learning resources (e.g., library resources and workshops), stable housing environments/accommodation, and a safe and inclusive community, influence the completion of Indigenous graduates. As one of the fundamental requirements, ‘facilities are the foundation of learning’ and having sufficient learning resources enables Indigenous graduates to complete their study. For example, a male respondent said: ‘sufficient learning resources will enable me to better complete my degree study.’ Another male graduate added that a ‘good [physical environment] gives me the facilities to be able to successfully complete my studies.’

Furthermore, our findings highlight that a safe, comfortable, and inclusive environment will strongly support their study, as Indigenous graduates expressed the importance of living in a safe and comfortable community, including suitable and stable accommodation. For instance, a male graduate said: ‘you need to be safe and feel comfortable where you live’ or ‘the process of learning requires a good accommodation environment without distractions.’ Another male graduate emphasised that a good accommodation environment is a must; otherwise, he could not concentrate on his studies. Moreover, a female graduate highlighted that living in a ‘bad environment’ could have a detrimental effect on both their life and studies, stating that ‘a good neighbourhood is less likely to influence the university experience compared to a bad neighbourhood.’

Interestingly, we also found a connection between a good physical environment and students’ health in Indigenous graduates’ responses. A male Indigenous graduate mentioned that ‘a good environment contributes to physical and mental health.’ A female graduate added that ‘you need a stable housing environment to be able to mentally focus.’

Economic Conditions Factor

Pham et al.’s (2025: 4) HESF model describes ‘financial resources allocated to support education outcomes, including scholarship, parents’ or guardians’ employment conditions in the economic conditions factor.’ In this study, we found that the stable employment conditions of parents or guardians, scholarships, and concerns about paying tuition fees influenced the completion of Indigenous graduates.

The stable employment conditions of parents/guardians play a crucial role in supporting students’ completion of their university degree. A stable financial situation at home allows students to focus on their studies without the

added burden of financial stress. For instance, a male Indigenous graduate emphasised that his parents were able to cover his living expenses, which significantly eased his financial worries. Another male graduate echoed this sentiment, stating, ‘I need my parents to support me financially.’ This financial backing enables students to concentrate more effectively on their study, as one male graduate noted, ‘The financial support from my family helps me better study the degree course.’ Moreover, the stability provided by financial security extends beyond academic issues, contributing to a student’s overall wellbeing and confidence. As one student shared, ‘the financial support at home allows me to focus on my studies,’ and ‘it is very important for my confidence, so I need my parents’ support and encouragement when I go to school.’ This highlights how the stable employment of parents not only alleviates financial pressure but also fosters a supportive environment that is essential for student success.

Our study found that concerns about paying tuition fees significantly restricted Indigenous graduates from completing their degrees. Financial stress was a major barrier, with one female graduate noting that ‘you can study better if you have no worries,’ emphasising, ‘I can’t go to school without an income.’ Many grew up in poverty, and government support like Centrelink was often insufficient. In some cases, families struggled to cover tuition costs, highlighting the need for additional financial support, such as scholarships and government funding, to help Indigenous students overcome these challenges and complete their degree.

Health and Wellbeing Factor

Both physical and mental health are included in the health and wellbeing factor of the HESF model (Pham et al. 2025). Our study found that both physical and mental health influenced Indigenous graduates’ completion, and the accessibility of healthcare clinics or centres when they had concerns about their health also contributed to students’ completion.

There is a recurrent theme in the responses of Indigenous graduates that a healthy body and mind are crucial to their learning journey. Many graduates highlighted that maintaining a healthy body and mind was key to their success. For example, one male graduate mentioned: ‘A healthy body and mind is conducive to the better completion of the degree,’ or ‘a healthy body can make learning more efficient,’ while a female graduate observed, ‘a healthy body will keep you focused on your studies.’ Another respondent shared how being mentally and physically well allowed them to concentrate better, emphasising that ‘only a healthy body can bear the pressure of study.’ This theme is further illustrated by a female graduate who recounted how health challenges nearly derailed her degree, reinforcing the idea that good health is essential for academic completion.

Our study also highlighted that mental health, in particular, plays a pivotal role in the academic success of Indigenous students. Graduates repeatedly stressed that mental wellbeing is critical to navigating the challenges of their studies. One graduate emphasised, ‘mental health is the most important because you need to be mentally prepared to face all the challenges.’ A male graduate further explained, ‘if you’re stressed, anxious, depressed, etc., you can’t be expected to perform well academically.’ Others echoed this sentiment, noting that ‘without good mental health, you won’t feel motivated or safe to go on,’ and that ‘mental health boosts motivation,’ underscoring its significance in the completion of their degrees.

However, our study also revealed a significant barrier that while Indigenous graduates generally found health clinics and centres accessible, mental health services were often too expensive and unaffordable. One male graduate noted, ‘I could seek the help of a psychiatrist,’ but emphasised that ‘mental health support was too expensive.’

Individual Characteristics Factor

The individual characteristics in the HESF model include personal attributes such as motivation, resilience, diligence, confidence, engagement, and a desire for success (Pham et al. 2025). In this study, we found that Indigenous graduates exhibited a strong determination to complete their university degrees. They adapted quickly to the demands of university education and actively engaged in their learning. Our findings also indicated that Indigenous graduates worked diligently on their studies, demonstrating confidence in their ability to complete their degrees. They were able to cope with study-related stress and persisted in their academic journey.

Our study highlights the crucial influence of individual characteristics on the university completion of Indigenous graduates. Personal attributes such as determination, adaptability, and a strong desire to succeed were consistently identified as key factors driving student success. For instance, a female graduate stated, ‘My personality can make me adapt to study well,’ showcasing the importance of adaptability in navigating university demands. Another female graduate shared, ‘I took the utmost determination to push through exhaustion and stress,’ emphasising the role of perseverance. Adaptability emerged repeatedly in the responses, with graduates describing it as ‘strong adaptability,’ ‘a strong ability to adapt,’ and ‘personal adaptability is very useful.’ They also noted that ‘adaptability makes it easier to overcome difficulties,’ reinforcing that the ability to adjust is essential for studying and succeeding. These findings demonstrate that the personal abilities and resilient traits of Indigenous students are fundamental to their persistence and successful completion of their university degrees.

While resilience is an important trait for Indigenous graduates, as reported in another publication (Pham et al. 2025), this chapter focuses on the crucial role of motivation and engagement in their academic success. Many Indigenous graduates emphasised that motivation is key to achieving their goals. As one male graduate explained, ‘motivation is very important in getting things done successfully.’ Another highlighted that ‘motivation is needed to keep going,’ underscoring its role in sustaining effort throughout their studies. For some, a high level of motivation was necessary to complete their academic tasks, with one graduate sharing, ‘I need a lot of motivation to complete my assignments,’ and another adding, ‘having motivation gets you up every day.’ Motivation also played a pivotal role in their engagement with university courses. As one male graduate noted, ‘there must be personal motivation to engage in university courses.’ These findings illustrate how motivation and engagement drive Indigenous graduates towards completing their degrees.

In sum, our findings emphasised the significant impact of social environment, physical environment, economic conditions, health and wellbeing, and individual characteristics on the university degree completion of Indigenous graduates. In the next section, we will discuss what more we, (i.e., the government, the universities leaders, and other stakeholders) can do to further support Indigenous graduates’ success in completing their university degrees and to keep their engagement in their learning journey.

Discussion

In the above section, we shared the findings from the social determinants of higher education influencing Indigenous mature-aged graduates’ success. Our findings underscore the critical need for financial support for Indigenous mature-aged graduates and highlight its significant contribution to their successful completion of university degrees. Our research provides evidence that financial support is an effective and efficient solution to the financial challenges faced by Indigenous mature students. In particular, ‘economic conditions, particularly financial hardship, were one of the key factors affecting Indigenous students’ completion. Students often had to rely on support from family and/or take on work while studying to make ends meet’ (Anderson et al. 2024: n.p). We have raised this issue in responding to the Australian Universities Accord Final Report, saying that there is a push to increase Indigenous students and voices in higher education, but we need more detail and funding (Anderson et al. 2024). A large percentage of Indigenous students are from remote areas (AIHW 2024) with around 3.5% of Indigenous mature-aged students from remote regions compared with 12% from non-remote areas (AIHW 2023). Being from a remote area carries extra financial demands for housing and relocation and the cost of frequent travelling to communities (Behrendt et al. 2012).

The Indigenous Strategy Report (Universities Australia 2020) found that Indigenous graduates have higher employment rates than non-Indigenous graduates, with 92% of Indigenous postgraduates working full-time following graduation. Despite the higher employment rates, there remains a very low number of Indigenous Australian academics in higher education, Australian Government, Department of Education (2024b) reported that only 2,424 Indigenous staff, accounting for 1.8%, are employed in Australian academia. However, university completions are connected to higher employment outcomes which is essential because Indigenous students enter the workforce later in their careers, putting them at an economic disadvantage compared to their non-Indigenous peers.

Behrendt et al. (2012) point out that long-term financial security challenges indigenous mature students because they have a shorter time frame to achieve greater professional earning rates. Being older, Indigenous students have greater personal and financial responsibilities (Rochecouste et al. 2017). However, Plater et al. (2015) suggest that although Indigenous students might have a short time being professionally productive following education, this is feasible for a substantial personal, familial, generational, and social transformation. Notably, improving their sociocultural status and empowering their communities are two main goals of mature Indigenous students attending university (Plater et al. 2015).

While our findings indicate that family financial support made a significant contribution by helping Indigenous graduates stay focused on their studies instead of working, some studies highlight that mature Indigenous students also face career interruptions to pursue higher education (Pechenkina and Anderson 2011). Leaving their work also brings extra financial pressure, as Indigenous students must rely on available scholarships as their only income. Often, however, a scholarship is insufficient to cover their cost of living. Behrendt et al. (2012) discuss this topic in depth; they propose that Indigenous workers should have access to training facilities to improve both their workplace and communities rather than having to leave their jobs. Additionally, professional associations and employers must 'support their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees to undertake higher education, including through cadetship models, scholarships and flexible leave arrangements' (Behrendt et al. 2012: 18). They also suggest that the Indigenous labour force, which includes Indigenous peoples, is well positioned to supply a potential pool of university-ready candidates.

Even though a range of scholarships and grants are available for Indigenous, some of these are not taken (Pechenkina and Anderson 2011). It seems that scholarship information for Indigenous students is not always accessible. Financial aid and requirements should be clarified (Behrendt et al. 2012). Rochecouste et al. (2017) point out that some students who received funding to cover their studies needed to borrow money from friends or family to address

additional costs not covered by their scholarship because they were not previously informed about these potential expenses (such as travel or accommodation). One way of providing more information about scholarships and requirements is for universities to connect more with communities (Behrendt et al. 2012). Buckskin et al. (2018: 87) add that it is also essential to review the scholarship eligibility criteria, as these 'should respond to the holistic experiences and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and not just duplicate non-Aboriginal criteria.' Similarly, Behrendt et al. (2012) call for examining Indigenous students' current financial support, focusing on providing additional income to support postgraduate Indigenous students with career responsibilities.

A supportive social environment – encompassing a positive learning atmosphere, academic and administrative staff support, and peer support – is crucial to the success of Indigenous graduates. Such support helps Indigenous students overcome the challenges and barriers that can hinder success, making their university learning journey more manageable and achievable. For Indigenous mature students, tertiary education frequently entails substantial life-changing experiences, such as leaving the community for the first time (Buckskin et al. 2018). Being far away from their communities is a cause of feeling isolated (AIHW and National Indigenous Australians Agency 2023). Therefore, Indigenous peers are a crucial support system. Pechenkina and Anderson (2011) claim that Indigenous units are central to supporting Indigenous students. It is also essential to receive support from peers, academic and non-academic staff, especially during their first year at university. Additionally, having more Indigenous peoples actively participating in universities and encouraging new Indigenous students to participate also increases their feeling of belonging (Behrendt et al. 2012).

However, studies suggest there are not enough staff to provide the needed support or be role models for Indigenous students, so universities have to work on developing strategies to increase the number of Indigenous staff and peers (Pechenkina and Anderson 2011; Plater et al. 2015; Buckskin et al. 2018). Moreover, to support Indigenous students, university staff should be aware of the extra responsibilities Indigenous students have and the tensions they can cause (Rochecouste et al. 2017).

Through the HESF model, our findings amplified the need of Indigenous graduates for being supported holistically, and called for the involvement of higher education policymakers, governments, and university leaders for Indigenous student success. Some important initiatives have been developed in recent years to widen access to higher education for Indigenous students, including Universities Australia, Indigenous Strategy, Indigenous Student Success programme (ISSP), and Closing the Gap. While these programmes have made commendable strides, additional measures are necessary to provide comprehensive support for Indigenous student success.

To increase access to higher education for Indigenous students, the Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy 2022–2025 focuses on improving the university environment to better support Indigenous communities and encourage interaction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (Universities Australia 2022). Additionally, the strategy aims to boost the participation of Indigenous graduates, students, and both academic and non-academic staff through increased enrolments and completions, as well as the implementation of cross-cultural training programmes. To evaluate the effectiveness of this strategy, Universities Australia (2020) implemented the first evaluation and reported that key achievements so far include specific recruitment programmes for Indigenous students, the implementation of governance structures to ensure Indigenous representation, and initiatives to incorporate Indigenous knowledge and values into the curriculum. However, the report also acknowledged that there is more work to be done, particularly in areas such as increasing Indigenous staff numbers and improving student retention rates.

Furthermore, our findings accentuated the critical role of Indigenous support units in supporting Indigenous graduates' completion and consistent with Anderson et al. (2021) who highlighted the role of the Indigenous postgraduate programme officer. The ISSP has proven highly effective since its introduction in 2017, offering crucial financial support to universities for aiding Indigenous students. Through scholarships such as the Indigenous Commonwealth Education Costs, Indigenous Commonwealth Accommodation Costs, and Indigenous Commonwealth Reward Scholarships, the programme has significantly enhanced educational outcomes for Indigenous students (National Indigenous Australian Agency 2024). ISSP funds are distributed based on key performance metrics, including enrolments, student success rates, course completions, and the participation of Indigenous students from remote areas (Australian Government 2017). Given its positive impact on Indigenous student retention and completion, the ISSP should be widely implemented across all Australian universities to foster greater inclusion and success for Indigenous populations in higher education.

While a range of support for Indigenous mature-aged students, and Indigenous students in general, is in place and ongoing in Australia to increase access to higher education, retain them in the programmes, and improve their completion rates, few resources and services that assist students' mental health are reported. It is suggested that the Australian Government and universities prioritise the development of targeted mental health programmes that are affordable and cater to the unique cultural, social, and emotional needs of Indigenous students, ensuring a holistic approach to their academic success and wellbeing.

Conclusion

This chapter explores the influence of five key social determinants through the lens of the HESF model on Indigenous mature-aged graduates. These five

factors include the social environment, physical environment, economic conditions, health and wellbeing, and individual characteristics. Our findings indicate that each factor influenced the graduates' ability to complete their studies at various points. The ways in which Indigenous graduates responded to these impacts played a crucial role in their success, despite the many challenges and barriers they faced. While they received significant support to overcome these obstacles, more needs to be done to ensure that their learning journey is not as difficult. Ultimately, it should be an enjoyable and rewarding experience.

Compared to younger Indigenous students, mature-aged Indigenous students have to deal with more challenges, such as family care duty and career interruption. Further examining some of the valuable existing initiatives, it is noticeable that while these programmes are designed to provide support and resources for Indigenous peoples pursuing higher education, none are explicitly targeted at supporting mature Indigenous students. However, there are notable differences regarding the specific needs and challenges of those embarking on their learning journey later in life.

While the findings presented in this chapter demonstrated the impacts of social determinants on Indigenous graduates in Australian higher education context, there are opportunities for university leaders in the international context to utilise the five factors we presented to evaluate the social impacts on their students. Further research, which takes these five factors into account, will need to be undertaken to explore how diverse socioeconomic and cultural contexts affect student outcomes. This will help in developing more targeted strategies to address social inequities and improve student success across various educational environments.

Note

- 1 In this chapter we used 'Indigenous graduates' to refer to mature-aged Indigenous graduates who were aged 25 and over.

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11

PATHWAYS THAT ENABLE EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

An Overview of the Open Foundation Programme at the University of Newcastle, Australia and the Experiences of Mature-Age, First-in-Family, Regional, and Online Students

Anna Bennett and Cathy Stone

Introduction

This chapter identifies and discusses the interventions that enable equity in higher education (HE) and the experiences of mature-age, first-in-family (FIF), regional, and online students, through a focus on the Open Foundation programme at the University of Newcastle, Australia, which was first introduced in 1974. It also explores the subsequently developed suite of other fee-free university preparation and qualifying pathways at this University for students who have not already obtained direct access to a degree or who do not feel adequately prepared for a degree (e.g. because of time elapsed since last study). These pathways enable both access to HE and preparation for it, contributing to both the high rate of enrolments of students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds at the University, as well as to their experiences of success in their degrees.

The Open Foundation programme was 50 years old in 2024 and is the oldest and largest of its type in the country. A significant number (between 17-20%) of commencing undergraduate students has previously enrolled in the University's suite of pathways. The pathways engage many previously educationally disadvantaged learners aged from 16 through to 80 years of age (and a few may have been older over the years in seeking this, to engage with the benefits gained from university study). However, the focus of this chapter is on students aged over 25 years, those who are FIF, given that a large proportion of students in these pathways identify as FIF, as well as those from regional and more remote areas and requiring study in blended online modes.

Around 40% of all Australian domestic students begin university as mature-age students – defined here as being 25 years of age or over – with women

outnumbering men by around two to one in the 35-and-over age group (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Reasons for entering university later in life can be complex; and there are often pragmatic and economic reasons – such as getting a job, a better job, seeking more financial security for themselves and their family, or there may be other emotional reasons, such a desire to fulfil a long-term dream or ambition.

Commonly, there are also altruistic reasons, such as wanting to be a role model for their children or to ‘make a difference’ in the work that they are aiming to be qualified for (Stone, 2023). There are also challenges in returning to education later in life, with many mature-age students coming from backgrounds where *no-one amongst their family and friends has been to university before*, combined with the need to manage competing demands of work and family (Stone et al., 2016). For mature-age students, their ‘identity’ as student must often come last, with the competing identities of ‘parent’, ‘partner’ and/or ‘carer’ taking priority (Hewson, 2018). Such factors can unfortunately lead to some institutions applying a ‘deficit’ lens to older students, rather than looking at themselves and their practices to seek ways to reduce these challenges.

The pathways approaches and commitments described in this chapter are therefore critical for enabling the access, preparation and opportunity to succeed in HE for these important, large cohorts (Bennett and Burke, 2024). The educational design, including the modes, principles, pedagogy and curriculum embedded in the pathways are all identified as essential interventions to enable and support students from these cohorts who require a pathway for admission and preparation (Bennett et al., 2024), as outlined in the following discussion.

The Open Foundation and Suite of Enabling Pathways at the University of Newcastle

Over 70,000 people have participated in one of these pathways since they began in 1974. The Pathways and Academic Learning Support (PALS) Centre, where these programmes are offered, aims to provide a culturally safe and inclusive environment for all students. The following is a list of these pathway types.

- Enabling Pathway Programmes:
 - *Open Foundation*: This programme provides an understanding of the university as well as preparation. It is both free and flexible. Graduates of Open Foundation gain entry into all degrees at the University of Newcastle (based on the grades the student has achieved in Open Foundation aligned with the required selection rank set for a degree), along with access to a Guaranteed Admissions Scheme (for selected degrees if students pass all their Open Foundation courses). Students

gain a Certificate of Attainment that can be used for entry into other universities that accept the pathway.

- *Yapug*: Another free enabling pathway programme, Yapug focuses on supporting Indigenous students. It provides an effective pathway to university through developing academic skills and knowledge, combined with deep understandings and connections to First Nations knowledges, cultures and networks. Like Open Foundation, Yapug not only provides access to degrees but also excitement about lifelong learning.
- Diploma Pathways:
 - Diplomas provide students with a focused course of undergraduate-level study while providing the introductory skills required for further study and essential support. Upon completion, students gain guaranteed entry into degrees and receive credit for specific courses, meaning that many gain access to the second year of a degree on completion of the diploma pathway.
- Preparatory Programmes:
 - NUPrep: These short bridging and refresher courses help a wide diversity of students from diverse backgrounds and ages gain a taste of university and essential knowledge and skills in a specific field before starting university. Students do not gain access to degrees in these very short bridging individual units of learning (from one week on-campus to self-paced online for up to three weeks). Rather, they gain access through pathways, including from VET and high school, and then use NUPrep to transition effectively into the university environment and their chosen field.
- Outreach and Partnership Initiatives:
 - PALS engages deeply with communities through the UNI STEPS and UNI NEXT programmes to widen participation in HE. For UNI STEPS, senior school students, in partnership with the PALS Centre, meaningful age-appropriate activities are co-designed and tailored to their needs while at school. Through contextualised collaborations with community organisations and other groups, UNI NEXT engages with community members to explore what university is like and what is available, while learning about key university-learning literacies, systems, supports, services and pathways.

Educational Approach

The suite of fee-free university pathways are designed to meet the needs of different cohorts and individuals, through a choice of on-campus or blended learning options, which include synchronous online sessions and/or asynchronous

self-paced learning enhanced by enabling academics to serve students who are often not only financially but also time-poor due to complex and compounding inequalities. However, it is important to recognise that ensuring a high-quality learning experience, and student engagement and success for any form of online study is something that requires an ongoing significant investment of time and resourcing. Even when barriers to digital access are overcome (such as access to reliable provision of internet access and devices), regular online participation is difficult for some students to maintain over time and, resultingly, completion rates for any fully online study are lower than on-campus modes of education, for a variety of reasons. Research (see especially Stone, 2017; Stone et al., 2016) shows that feelings of learning isolation, uncertainty and distance are common reasons for participants withdrawing or disengaging from optimal approaches to learning, and especially for those already experiencing disadvantage. Not only are there often greater inequalities and/or distances from participants to an education provider (the reason for requiring online in the first place), but also less peer learning and interpersonal bonding opportunities for connections between participants. This is challenging when collaboration and peer interaction are important in the preparation, transition and success of underrepresented cohorts (Stone, 2017). Because of this, Stone (2017) argues that personalised approaches and empathic pedagogies and regular check ins with students must be embedded throughout online programmes, and the humanistic elements of learning and teaching foregrounded. More about the importance of enabling and inclusive approaches to online learning is provided below.

As discussed in Bennett and Burke (2024), inclusive pathways which work to provide inclusion in HE apply critical evaluative, research-informed and continuous forms of reflection/action. These are required to address socio-cultural biases and disengaging educational structures and pedagogies. Enabling pedagogical practices are essential for challenging and redressing discriminatory deficit views and discourses that are institutionalised and invisible to many who inadvertently reproduce them. Enabling pedagogies are instead important for enabling student engagement through the re-framing of the concepts of learner and teacher, and for developing powerful collective knowledges and capabilities.

In summary, the key pedagogical, content and learning interventions must be based on an overarching structure of open-access (no tests or selection ranks for entry which are based on previous educational grades achieved) and fee-free tuition, which applies:

- 1 *A Clear Strengths-Based Approach* which recognises the unique skills, perspectives and assets that *each* student brings to HE. Every person learns and has a right to. It enables flexibility for those with challenges accessing campus for set times through high-quality asynchronous materials and a wide choice of courses and on-campus classes, while supported by responsive teaching

- staff. By valuing difference and focusing on individual strengths, we place them at the centre of the learning experience.
- 2 *Inclusive Curriculum and Teaching Methods* which simultaneously builds: students' learning capabilities, excitement about learning and navigational capacity for enabling next steps at university. By integrating these elements, a holistic learning experience can be achieved for students.
 - 3 *Appreciation for and Building on Students' Existing Knowledge and Experiences* involves applying concepts in ways that resonate with students' lives and aims and makes the material relevant and engaging.
 - 4 *A Research and Evidence-Based Approach*, which is actively engaged with ongoing, sector-leading evidence-based research and data. This ensures that programmes remain impactful and effective in a dynamic educational landscape.
 - 5 *Continuous Development, Evaluation and Quality Assurance*, enabling the pathways to remain responsive and engaging, which ensures both rigour and relevance for students.
 - 6 *Student Support and Empathy* for all situations and backgrounds, with the recognition that disadvantage can persist even after students enter degrees. Therefore, this appreciation must be clearly conveyed to students, so that they feel connected to study and staff. Normalising support services for all students is important so they feel comfortable accessing them. Time flexibility, especially for assessments, such as providing structured alternative due dates, is shown to be highly valued by students. This includes flexible approaches to assessment focused on enabling optimal learning opportunities for all students' needs.
 - 7 *Enabling Long-Term Commitment* is a contextualised and ongoing commitment to an inclusive and equitable philosophy and function. It recognises that everyone benefits from inclusion and equity in HE and appreciates that this extends beyond individual students over time. This enables the education to positively impact families, communities, economies and professions, over generations.

Mature-Age Students

Rubin et al. (2018) challenge conventional notions of the 'ideal' student as being young and unencumbered. Their study with 983 undergraduate students of roughly equal numbers of men and women, aged 17–70 at a large Australian public university found that, interestingly, 'older female students showed the greatest deep learning' and 'greater satisfaction with their degree' (p. 1) with 'age being a stronger predictor of deep learning among women than among men' (p. 12). There is other extensive research literature about the experience and wisdom that mature-age women have developed over time through managing families and households, workplaces and other life experiences (O'Shea et al., 2024).

Examples of how their many skills are demonstrated in the study environment include time management and organisational skills, ability to multi-task and persistence to keep working while under pressure and through distractions.

There are indeed ways in which educational institutions can make the university experience less challenging (see, for example, Andrewartha and Harvey, 2021), such as by recognising ‘the value of student parents’ through ‘course structures and study requirements [that] could be more flexible and accommodating to their needs and schedules’; ‘financial support to help cover their living and study expenses and allow them to reduce time spent in paid work’; and ‘more affordable and accessible on-campus childcare’ (Andrewartha, 2021). Within Australia, the greater flexibility offered to students during Covid-19 to help them adjust to studying online was greatly appreciated by student mothers as Sally Savage’s study (Savage, 2021, p. 9) revealed. Examples included ‘granting all students a five-day extension on all assignments without requiring the usual documentation’ and an increase in ‘personal contact’ from the institution ‘which made the studying mothers feel supported which created a sense of belonging’. Similarly, Dickson and Tennant’s (2018) study conducted in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) found a very high level of support by faculty staff for new mothers returning to study, through being empathetic to their new situation and willingness to offer out-of-office hours contact with tutors.

Regional/Remote Students

Those living in regional areas of Australia are less than half as likely as those within metropolitan areas (18.5% vs 39.7%) to gain an undergraduate degree or above by the time they are 35 years old (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019; Halsey, 2018). Average incomes in regional areas are lower than those in metropolitan areas (ABS, 2021), with higher proportions of regional populations falling into the HE equity categories of low socioeconomic status (low-SES) and Indigenous (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) students. Students in regional areas of Australia who go to university are also more likely to be *first in their families* to do so (Cooper et al., 2017; Crawford and Emery, 2021; McLachlan et al., 2013).

Barriers such as the financial cost of going to university and lack of access to a university campus locally emerge as strong deterrents in recent research (O’Shea et al., 2019; Katersky Barnes et al., 2019). The multiple complexities involved for regional high school students in deciding whether to go to university, especially if that involves moving away from their home town, family and friends, has also become more apparent (Gore et al., 2019; O’Shea et al., 2019; Ronan, 2020; Stone et al., 2022). The influence of community aspirations and expectations has been shown to be considerable (Kilpatrick et al., 2023; Patfield et al., 2021; Vernon and Drane, 2021), contributing to the mix of practical and emotional barriers (Vernon et al., 2018).

How Online Delivery Can Help Enable Equity

The increasing availability of offering open-entry and alternative-entry pathways nationally *online* is providing opportunities for those who might not otherwise gain entry to university (Shah et al., 2014; Stone and O'Shea, 2019). 'The delivery of enabling programmes online provide access and opportunity for many disadvantaged students' (Shah et al., 2014, p. 49).

Indeed, considerable evidence over many years has demonstrated that the availability of online learning more broadly is helping to widen access to HE, making it possible for more students from diverse backgrounds to study for a university degree (Ilgaz and Gülbahar, 2015; Stone et al., 2016; Stone, 2019). More than 15 years ago, Knightley (2007) found in her study conducted in the UK at the Open University UK, that online learning 'transcended geographical, physical, visual and temporal barriers to accessing education, and reduced socio-physical discrimination' (p. 281). These opportunities have only continued to grow, with the flexibility offered by online learning enabling students to combine study with paid work, family and other responsibilities.

This is particularly important as online students are more likely to come from backgrounds and circumstances historically underrepresented in HE (Hewson, 2018; Ilgaz and Gülbahar, 2015; Moore and Greenland, 2017; Ragusa and Crampton, 2018; Stone, 2019). Since 2020, online learning has become much more of a mainstream activity as a direct result of Covid-19 pandemic restrictions during 2020–2021 worldwide. While on-campus study has gradually been resuming across most institutions globally from 2022 onwards, online delivery continues to be offered more routinely than ever before (Stone, 2022). Research conducted with online students post-2020 clearly shows that even students who did not choose online study but found themselves unable to study any other way during Covid-19 restrictions, appreciated the greater flexibility associated with it (Attree, 2021; James et al., 2021; Marković et al., 2021; Martin, 2020). This was particularly the case amongst students who were older, with family, caring and paid work responsibilities (James et al., Marković et al., 2021).

For mature-age women with caring responsibilities, various studies have shown that the key reason for choosing online study is the greater flexibility to fit in with their caring and other home or work responsibilities (Hewson, 2018; Houlden and Veletsianos, 2019; Kahu et al., 2014; Lukacs, 2018; Stone and O'Shea, 2019). With the increase in online delivery since 2020, these benefits of online study are being recognised more widely, with post-2020 research finding 'overall agreement that online learning presented flexibility and adaptability for mothers which was helpful in managing study and family life' (Savage, 2021, p. 8).

The increased presence of online learning since 2020 presents an opportunity now for universities to 'engage diverse, new cohorts, increase the scale of engagement, and provide participants with exposure to a greater range of

outreach programmes and learning experiences than traditionally encountered' (Dodd et al., 2021, p. 12). This includes students in regional/remote areas, not only those who are mature-age but also high school leavers. With the recent Australian government focus on further growth of Regional University Study Hubs, as a direct result of the recent Universities Accord Final Report recommendations (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023), there is the potential for universities to increasingly offer regional students a wider range of online courses, with students utilising their local study hub that provides the necessary technology as well as social and emotional support from study hub staff and other students. This is but one example of how changes in government policy can benefit regional/remote students more equitably, making university possible for the many regional high school leavers who would not otherwise be in a position, financially or socially, to view university study as a realistic and achievable option (Stone et al., 2022).

Conclusions

For over 50 years, the Open Foundation and other enabling programmes at the University of Newcastle, Australia, have occupied a crucial place in enabling the access, preparation and opportunity for underrepresented student cohorts to understand, enter and succeed in HE. The flexibility of the delivery mode offered – enabling a blend of both online and on-campus study – along with the essential contextualised educational principles, pedagogy and curriculum, continues to enable an increasing number of students to undertake a pathway for admission to and preparation in HE.

This chapter has outlined the various challenges, particularly facing mature-age and regional/remote students (of whom a high proportion are FIF) as they transition into and through HE. It has also discussed and described the ways in which the Open Foundation and other enabling programmes are designed to smooth the path for these underrepresented cohorts, providing a realistic opportunity for them to make a successful transition into HE, and in turn to achieve their HE goals.

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12

CULTURAL ADVANCES IN THE CLASSROOM: PRACTICE, MARKETING AND GLOBAL DOMESTICITY FOR WAMS

Rebekah Okpoti

Introduction

This chapter conceptualises a future relationship model between study, space, and domesticity for mature students. The trio of universities in Liverpool, one of the UK's most diverse cities, will be used as case studies for critical analysis of marketing, the process of attracting prospective students (recruitment). The practice of recruitment, meaning the practical processes involved, and domesticity, the community, security, and public home environment for mature students in the UK will be examined. The three universities are Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool John Moores University, and the University of Liverpool. The critical analysis will use (Williams and Roberts, 2023) 'I just think it's really awkward' as a premise for an intersectional relationship model for Widening Access for Mature Students (WAMS), considering marketing, practice, and Global Domesticity. The definition of Global Domesticity in this context is the global perspective on mature students belonging in Higher Education (HE).

Literature

WAMS programmes historically have primarily addressed the deficit in study skills (Richards and Miller, 2006) promoted with positivity as the lived experience of mature students (Wilson, 2002) and mothers in HE. Balancing time, study, and space (Webber and Dismore, 2021) as a mature student and addressing the area of technology attitudes (Staddon, 2020) are topics widely researched in WAMS for HE. However, the future of WAMS lies outside of the current paradigm of belonging (Ahn and Davis, 2023). Cultural advances surrounding marketing practice through events and Global Domesticity are underdeveloped areas.

Case Study

Liverpool, UK, has a trio of universities in one of the UK's most diverse cities. A simulation was carried out to find out the university marketing practice aimed at the mature student's journey to an undergraduate degree, mature being aged 21 plus, through the lens of (Williams and Roberts, 2023) 'I just think it's really awkward'. The aim was to determine the marketing practice behind the degree as a product for mature students. The simulation covered Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool John Moores University, and the University of Liverpool in the 2023/2024 academic year. All three universities are located within a five-mile radius of one another.

Liverpool Hope University had a dedicated area on their website for mature students. However, the visual representation and imagery did not represent the undergraduate programmes as age inclusive; all images were projecting young students under 21. Mature students were invited to reach out via email to the university, something students under 21 were not invited to do; they were invited to apply through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) first. Liverpool Hope University uses the foundation course as a key entry point for mature students, where the required study skills can be developed.

Liverpool John Moores marketed the undergraduate journey for mature students as the same experience as for a student under 21. Accommodation requirements and information for students with dependents, regardless of age, was the only area that contained any indication that a mature student's journey to an undergraduate degree would differ from any other students. The supporting visual presentation had no variation for mature and under 21 students. Mature students were invited to attend an open day to find out more along with all other students.

University of Liverpool's marketing of the undergraduate journey for mature students focused on the success the university graduates have had and acknowledged the 'big step' mature students over 21 would be taking in starting a degree programme. There was significant material on the importance of access to HE courses through partner institutions, and that to learn along with peers (of a similar age), mature students would be best served by connecting with a partner organisation first.

Findings

A comparison of the three websites shows:

Two out of three universities presented study skills as the primary issue that a mature student would face as a difficulty in taking up HE.

Two out of three universities presented mature students as a separate category of learner from 'normal' students aged under 21.

Two out of three universities indicated that potential undergraduate degree programme students should have completed prior study, specifically in one of their access to HE courses or on a foundation year course. Access to HE courses is a pre undergraduate course typically taking place in Further Education institutions or local community centres as courses or evening classes with the aim at preparing students for universities.

Two out of three universities indicated an assumption that a mature student would be applying to study undergraduate and not postgraduate programmes.

One out of three universities presented the mature student journey as equal, in regard to student experience offering, to other (under 21) students.

Two out of three universities indicated that access to HE courses or foundation year courses may be attended with either similar or other at the same academic level as learners.

Discussion

Williams and Roberts discuss the culture surrounding the widening of access for mature students relating to the felt reality of the individual mature student (Williams and Roberts, 2023). The practice of marketing the undergraduate degree as a product for mature students is complex. Research by Williams and Roberts (2023) shows there are issues around belonging, security, identity, digital literacy, inclusion, lived experience, responsibilities, and access. However, students aged under 21 are now experiencing the same difficulties as their mature student peers. This is representative of the global picture for students' access. This is where the topic of domesticity comes into view. For example, in the UK alone, over 69% (Brown, 2007a) of undergraduate students aged 18+ are in paid employment for more than 20+ hours per week. The international cost of living crisis is impacting students' educational choices in a post-COVID-19 world and brings the issue of the global home to the fore around widening access for mature students. The conversation is not only about mature students but what it is to be a student of any age undertaking an undergraduate programme, not forgetting loneliness as a key metric now considered by the UN. A survey across 142 countries revealed that the highest percentage of loneliness was college/university young adults between the ages of 19 and 29 (27%) (Fleck, 2023)

Loneliness Statistics by Race

Reports suggest that people from racial minorities often feel significantly lonelier in HE. A study by Wu et al. (2024) for the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine suggests that 44% of Black adults in the U.S. have reported feeling lonely, compared to 37% of white adults. According to a study by Cigna (Belcher et al., 2024), Hispanic or Latino people have a higher rate of

feeling lonely in comparison to non-Hispanic individuals. Some of the common reasons behind Hispanic or Latino people feeling lonelier are discrimination, language barriers, and lack of social support. Asian Nationals are also likely to feel lonelier because of various cultural aspects such as collectivism as a form of social organisation. According to a study conducted by the National Asian American Survey (Ormiston et al., 2024), Asian Americans who are facing discrimination have a higher chance of reporting loneliness.

The practice of marketing of differentiation and positioning in relation to mature students over 21 has shifted practically and conceptually. This shift can be articulated as a move from widening access in HE to widening domesticity within HE in a conversation that goes beyond a degree product and study skills to holistic wellbeing. What could a conceptual framework for cultural advances in the classroom that includes WAMS look like? The suggested theoretical framework is Global Domesticity.

Domesticity

Domesticity as a concept has a varied history of understanding from the first dwelling in a womb to the 19th-century culture of domesticity and womanhood to a contemporary social sciences construction of home as ‘a private, familial retreat from the public sphere’ (Hollows, 2012). Domesticity as a conservative power force in this context situates the issue of global loneliness as a new paradigm alongside advances in classroom culture, domesticity being the animated relationship between public and private home occurring in the classroom context. Considering Global Domesticity in this context facilitates a framework of integrated practice for mature learners.

It could be argued that loneliness as a subfield would be considered as part of ‘student experience - wellbeing - mental health/student engagement’ processes. While in many regards this is appropriate, it is no longer fit for purpose because a student learner is not a separate entity within and outside the classroom, nor within the public shared or private shared space. This chapter proposes this new conceptual framework and a move towards a total sector, institutional and policy shift whereby the mature student’s experience from the initial marketing is positioned around a marketed cultural advance of surrounded culture: surrounded on an individual, class, cohort, collective, national, and global level called domesticity.

Brown’s (2007b) community of practice model is applied to the existing academic community but not to the marketing of the classroom for widening access. The community of practice is described as being ‘a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time’ and ‘an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge’. ‘Community of practice’ offers a way of talking about individual and collective meaning-making in a manner that links learning to sociocultural context (Wenger, 1998). ‘Why did you do it [the math] that

way?' This changes the form of membership within the classroom community. Teachers and students can make the shift from classroom relationships that reflect the traditional Initiation, Response, Evaluation (I–R–E) format (see Mehan, 1979) to more student-centred formats of classroom participation. The research of (Engle and Conant, 2002) provides insights into how such a reconceptualisation may take place.

Within academic environments, the community of practice model is the closest research-focused and not primarily teaching-focused environment that facilitates a culture of surrounded practice. This surrounded practice takes place primarily on a local level but includes shared space for a research-led community. For example, in Further Education, research is typically teaching practice-focused rather than a research environment-focused with a research-led community. The culture around mature students in the classroom can have a positioning of 'lack' rather than a 'surround' of attributes associated with wider access for mature students (using a definition of those 30+). Christensen and Craft (2021) discuss, in an example about mature students aged 21+, reasons for pursuing a nursing degree:

The reasons many of these students commence studies in tertiary nursing education appear to include both vocational and altruistic motives and the comfort that a nursing career will provide a sense of long-term financial stability and security (McCune et al., 2010). In (Kevern and Webb's, 2004), thematic analysis of mature student experiences, respondents describe nursing as the fulfilment of an earlier deferred commitment and missed opportunities. In their post-evaluation survey of a student welcoming programme, 48% of mature students did not attend because of competing demands on their time.

The Christensen and Craft (2021) study showed that students who did attend the welcome programme found it informative. The classroom culture set from the initial contact point in recruitment and marketing did not lay out the significance of the shared surrounded experience provided by the Global Domesticity framework.

Large sections of the HE sector have been:

Influenced by a marketized approach with courses seen as required economic investments, however, such an approach has enabled higher education institutions (HEIs) to increase their international presence and also to enhance their student profile. Nevertheless, marketing theories applied to the commercial sector may not be relevant to the HE sector.

and 'there is a growing trend of universities to engage in marketing and branding programmes' (Bunzel, 2007). Marketisation has opened several opportunities to

the HE sector to build strong relationship with the students and the community as partners in their endeavour to provide quality education. Based on empirical studies, Obermiller et al. (2005) and Ramachandran (2010) find that institutions generally prefer recognising students as products and students on the other hand prefer to be recognised as customers.

Thorough knowledge of the customer is fundamental to successful marketing. In the first place, the HE sector has dilemmas in defining its customer. Student aspiration can be lost in the marketing metaphors and process, Student centric and proactive marketing units in HEIs usually focus more on addressing students' needs than on identifying strategies to sell their own products.

In 2002, the HE sector moved to normalise the use of technology such as interactive whiteboards in the classroom and to begin to open up access in HE to non-traditional students. Viewing the literature by Reay et al. (2002) in 2024, there are many 'stories mature students tell to demonstrate determination, commitment, adaptability and many more triumphs of the will. There is much to celebrate. Yet, as we have also glimpsed from these students' narratives (Reay et al., 2002), the story of access remains one of grand designs and inadequate realisations, despite the dedication and commitment of many access tutors. As with all education policy, despite the superficial noisy welter of innovation, at a deeper, more impenetrable level, certain structures remain much more resistant to change, there is no uniformity of class conditions, practices, and outcomes. Social class is always mediated by ethnicity, marital status, and gender, and these mediations are played out in mature students' negotiations of the HE process.

In (Jones and McConnell, 2022), Jones & McConnell's study, *Changing Mindsets and Becoming Gritty* proposed that the adoption of a growth mindset would 'enable all students to enhance their sense of belonging in higher education (HE), their engagement in learning and their achievement'. While this study provided some interesting insights into positive mindset growth, it did not provide any insight into reasons for minimal results in cultural change in belonging or classroom practice. It could be argued that the problem is not the processes of entry or the access pathways in a technical and mechanical sense, i.e., location of university/university centre, application forms, open day availability, but rather the expectation from the marketing operation which translates through the technical processes into the reality. Mature students' expectations of the course will hearken back to the product sell (course title and opportunity offered) from the marketing into value in the classroom. However, the compounding loneliness epidemic and classroom environment, timetabling, surrounded experience, and community building has not moved on despite all the advances in technology, physical spaces, and subject matter.

Shahnaz and Qadir (2019) conducted a study on the conflicting debates about the marketisation of HE using six HE institutions, three in the public sector and three in the private sector. The study explored the impact that promotional content has on potential students' decisions. The findings of this study show:

A unanimous consensus that pressure of marketization is too strong to resist, and the universities have surrendered before this pressure; however, higher education should follow the higher ethical values as compared to general marketing trends.... Though there seemed to be a support for marketization as a strategic activity for the benefits associated with it, many of the experts in this study were in favour of spending more resources on improving the overall quality of education than spending lavishly on promotional aspects.... However, generally, the experts like and want the universities to be promoted and known by the people through their high-quality standards in education and learning.

This study was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic after which we have seen a significant increase in loneliness on a global scale. Ultimately, all institutions want to be known for their standard in education and learning. Reilly and Mariano (2021) offer some insights into purpose beyond the classroom, asking what is the purpose regarding WAMS? Revisiting the premise of 'I just think it's really awkward', the purpose of HE as a product including the classroom environment offers the opportunity for a cultural change in the relationship to the HE setting and framework in which mature students are situated. The early 2000s saw mature students' motivation for accessing wider and their selection of educational institution falling into three distinct categories (Harker et al., 2001):

- 1 'Final consumption: to equip oneself with the general cultural and intellectual equipment needed to 'lead a good life'.
- 2 Self-investment: to enhance one's earning capacity.
- 3 Social positioning: to attain or maintain, either for one's family or oneself, membership in a social or political class or clique'.

Two decades later, there is a further point to add elucidated by this chapter.

- 4 Global Domesticity: cultural advance of surrounded experience.

Crawford et al. (2022) conducted a study into experiences of belonging (or not) among mature-aged university students. The findings show students:

Feeling invisible, misunderstood and undervalued, due to certain entrenched institutional approaches, in many cases, students' experiences fell short of

the supportive and caring learning communities that pedagogical approaches advocate belonging in higher education.

This study indicated that the relationship between mature students and the university is complex. However, there is very limited research into classroom cultural advances to support the framework of Global Domesticity as ‘surrounded community’. This cultural advance is initially curated by marketing through events but also through advances in HE staff delivery.

Conclusion

In conclusion, at the introduction of this chapter, reference was made to (Williams and Roberts, 2023) ‘I just think it’s really awkward’ as a premise for an intersectional relationship model for WAMS. When considering strategic choices in marketing for WAMS students, a new framework is required; one that uses the new conceptual framework of Global Domesticity as an international movement. The infrastructure of student marketisation, recruitment, and experience needs to support surrounded community in the classroom. This framework includes the following layers: (i) Marketable offer Image and Language, (ii) Place, (iii) Space and Research, and (iv) People, which constitute the Global Domesticity Environment for WAMS. The Global Domesticity framework requires further pilot projects around implementation, utilising the tools of practice and marketing. This chapter outlines the need for the framework and the proposed model for further exploration.

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SECTION IV

Curriculum and Pedagogic Practices



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13

SOCIAL MEDIA

The Bridge Between Education & the Workplace for Mature Students

Bruce A J McLauchlan

Introduction: What Is LinkedIn?

LinkedIn is a social media networking site, but one aimed at the business community (Hanna, 2022). Described sometimes as ‘Facebook for business people’, the site has a number of key features that commend it for this purpose:

- The ability to make/maintain connections with colleagues, business associates and others working in similar fields.
- To interact with connections on the site ‘wall’, through the posting of articles, opinions, polls, etc.
- To interact privately with members, through a messaging service.
- For the individual to seek employment opportunities.
- For companies to use the site for recruitment.

These last two features make it a particularly useful tool for students nearing the end of their studies, or indeed during them. Students are able to see content from companies, but more importantly, to view content from those working for companies which might be of interest to students as potential future employers. This allows students to start to build up valuable profiles of potential employers, to gain insight into what they may be like to work for, alongside the sort of colleagues that they would be working with, in these organisations. Rather than simply looking at company branding on their own website, a clearer picture of genuine ethos, approach and impacts may be derived. Gilani and Cunningham (2017) make a clear connection between a company ‘brand’

and its impact on the employee, particularly where the longevity of any employment is concerned. Thus, students, as potential future employees, are able to establish which companies most closely mirror their own personal outlook and approach. Students might also use an approach to businesses and enterprises as part of a research project for their course. Including research data from companies and assessing employability aspects and their relevance in a research project will add intrinsic value to the project, while the student is simultaneously building an effective network for themselves.

The previous study described in more detail below (McLauchlan, 2023) discovered that users are active on LinkedIn with the same regularity that they are on other social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter/X. This may be seen to demonstrate that the articles posted are as close to ‘live’ information as is practicable. Furthermore, Barrera-Verdugo and Villarroel-Villarroel (2022) identified that, ‘higher exposure on these social media platforms is related to better entrepreneurial attitudes and perceptions’. The propensity towards communication of a two-way nature on these sites (posts, responses to posts, articles, ‘likes’, comments and polls, etc.) provides a base for students to start to interact with companies, and individuals from selected companies, on a semi-regular basis. The well-known paean to networking often espoused in the hackneyed phrase ‘It is not *what* you know; it is *who* you know’. has a solid factual basis. Much previous research offers insight into this (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Ahmed, 2020; Amin and Mahmood, 2020; Chandani et al., 2020; Yaseen and Yussef, 2016). LinkedIn, then, offers a gentle introduction to the world of networking, giving at least a solid base from which to grow and develop when it comes to physical networking with, for example, a room full of employers at a job fair.

About the Previous Study

This chapter is underpinned by a thesis written as a constituent part of an MA in International Business, entitled: *How might LinkedIn maintain its individuality, and therefore usefulness, as a professional business tool?* 144 business professionals, academics and students were surveyed for their views on LinkedIn, as both users and professionals. Of these, 36 (25%) were either mature students or worked in the higher education sector; the remainder held senior positions in the business and industry or service sectors. 21 questions were asked to explore four themes:

- 1 What is LinkedIn’s unique identity (if it has one)?
- 2 Why do users visit LinkedIn?
- 3 Is it, or is it not, a social media site?
- 4 Is LinkedIn adapting to meet the changing needs of users?

While there were, understandably, some split opinions for some of the questions, the dominant view was that LinkedIn is the only site for business

professionals. Thus, it can be seen that LinkedIn *must* be viewed as an essential tool in a student's employability arsenal. Even more so for widening access students, as it represents an ideal opportunity to present the likely breadth of their experience in a more engaging way than it might in a curriculum vitae, with its inherent space limitations.

The Habit-Forming Nature of (Assuetudes Towards) LinkedIn

(The word *assuetude* was used in the dissertation to convey a meaning beyond simply habit-forming; the word may, for example, also be used for *obsession* or *routine*.) Social media has been demonstrated to be habit-forming (Allcott et al., 2022; Felt and Robb, 2016; Djamaluddin et al., 2023). This may be viewed both positively and negatively. In respect of mature students and LinkedIn, it may be contended that this is a positive benefit; those students will be reviewing content on the site on, typically, a daily basis (the empirical research that underpins this chapter found that, of the 144 respondees, 50% of these accessed LinkedIn 'daily' or 'several times each day') thus, they will be familiarising themselves with news and updates more regularly than they would through using more traditional job opportunity seeking mechanisms. Additionally, they would gain wider insights into companies, and individuals who work for those companies.

The very essence of networking (physical or digital) is that of opening yourself up for opportunities. The more regular, and frequent the networking, the more likely it is to lead to opportunity (Shu et al., 2018). Building effective networks takes time; it is not simply a question of gaining a connection, it is one of building a strong relationship with that connection. Peng et al., 2022 discuss the effectiveness and impact of a personal network; they consider size, density and tie-strength (citing Koo, 2016) together, arguing that these impact upon, and determine the function of, social networks and their effect on entrepreneurial growth. This extrapolates to three variables when it comes to networks:

- 1 Network Size: how big is the network of itself, and size as a proportion of the overall scale of the connections; for example, the number of hotel manager connections contrasted with the number of hotel managers on the site.
- 2 Network Density: this is calculated by dividing the actual number of connections by the total possible number of connections within a specific network. In practical terms, consider a group on LinkedIn where users are connected based on mutual interests. If one group (for example, aficionados of organic food) frequently interact, share posts and comment on each other's content, their *network density* would be scored as *high*. Conversely, in another group of users, who only occasionally interact, their network density would be *low*.
- 3 Tie-Strength: measured as *strong ties* (close personal relationships, with frequent interaction, emotional intensity, mutual trust and high levels of

support), versus *weak ties* (distant relationships, with infrequent interaction, lacking in trust and where limited support is displayed). The implication is that *strong ties* are more likely to be treated as trusted connections.

It is, therefore, not a question simply of scale: how many connections, it is a question of effectiveness and impact: how *close* the relationships are; what the inherent *quality* of those relationships is. Colleges are able to help students to understand this by asking students a simple question: ‘Which is more likely to succeed: sending out identical CVs to 150 employers; or, sending separately tailored CVs, with cover letters, to ten carefully selected employers?’

The previous empirical study also demonstrated levels of intolerance amongst business professionals towards certain types of content; many decried the presence of posts that they deemed ‘more appropriate for Facebook’. Thus, the mature student is able to use that knowledge, and that detailed within this chapter, to create an engaging personal profile while, at the same time, avoiding the pitfalls of including the ‘wrong’ sort of content. When it comes to a student’s future employability, *all* social media must be considered (Agnihotri et al., 2023). Sites such as Instagram and Facebook reflect the prospective employee’s personal side – arguably the section that would be headed ‘Hobbies/Personal Interests’ on a CV – whereas LinkedIn should reflect sections such as ‘Personal Statement’, ‘Career History/Work Experience’, or ‘Education’. All may be considered acceptable in the employability process, but, as described above, the content should differ between one site and another and remain reflective of the split between ‘personal’ and ‘work’.

One final factor in respect of these assuetudes: the empirical study also showed that 80% of the respondents would advertise a vacancy on LinkedIn if they had one. Consequently, it may be seen that following, and engaging with, companies and individuals on LinkedIn has a high probability for an awareness of opportunities as they arise; sometimes before those opportunities are advertised on the recruitment company websites. Some employers and recruiters go further, actively searching LinkedIn for potential candidates, prior to the placing of any advertisement; thus, some jobs may be filled before they are even advertised.

THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY

A Thought Piece

I want to take you on a journey. A Customer Journey.

The Customer Journey [CJ] was developed in retail; its exact date of birth cannot be determined, but it is generally agreed that its gestation period started in the mid to late 1980s with it being properly birthed in the 1990s

(Fish, 2018; Cleverism, n.d.). The basis for the CJ was that of taking an outside-in approach to inform the activities undertaken by a company.

In the late 1990s, I joined a large catering group, with 1,200 restaurants spread across the country, progressing to become their Retail & Business Development Manager. We needed a technique to try to create uniform standards across all of those restaurants, which had clear challenges. I was therefore very excited to discover the Customer Journey; subsequently moulding it to meet our needs, fully rolling the programme out in 2004, after a period of specifying, trialling and testing.

Ever since that epiphany, the CJ has informed much of that which I do; it was one of the cornerstones of my consultancy, which was launched in 2009.

But let's bring the value of the CJ into sharp focus – as will be shown, it has a six-figure – or greater – value!

I was fortunate to land an opportunity to bid to undertake a series of audits of all the soft-services¹ for one of the UK's top four consultancy firms. To be honest, I was not very optimistic of winning the bid: they were a huge international concern; I was a tiny consultancy. That feeling was compounded when I was told that those that I was due to present to were running behind schedule and would I get myself a coffee in their coffee shop. But that coffee turned out to be worth over one-hundred-thousand pounds!

Walking up to the counter, my CJ Audit approach kicked in, 'Cappuccino, please', I asked, deliberately not specifying a size. The Barista replied: 'Medium?' I nodded. And that was the end of our conversation. But suddenly I was smiling to myself, they had gifted me a golden opportunity.

Let me explain: had the barista said 'large?', I would have said 'yes', as many customers would (and those who didn't would reply 'no thank you, medium (or small) will be fine.'). So I always trained baristas to say 'large?', as the cost difference between medium and large is just a bit more frothy milk, no extra coffee beans are required. Therefore, more profit. I also encourage them to try to sell more, by asking 'could I tempt you into having a pastry with it?' (much more effective than 'anything else?'). Again, not everyone will say yes, but those who do will be adding more profit.

As I sat, sipping my coffee, I spotted something else that made my smile even broader: notices around the refreshment areas were, in this particular week, declaring sales of 4,000,000 coffees, across their UK premises, each year (encouraging customers to reuse cups). That sounds a phenomenal amount of coffee, but when averaged out it is just under one coffee per employee, per day.

I started jotting some notes onto a napkin (using very, very, conservative mathematics). This is what I wrote:

Coffee Upselling:

- You state that you serve 4,000,000 coffees per year.
- If **only 10%** of the four million said yes to the larger coffee, that is another **£96,000** of straight profit (the estimated additional cost of the milk is in the region of 6p per cup; so, this yields 24p *pure profit* per cup, based on their selling price at the time).
- If the barista asked, 'Would you like some biscuits to go with the coffee?'; say only 100 customers said yes each day.
- If the biscuits sell for £2.00 with the caterer working on an 80% GP, that will yield a cash **profit** of £133 per day (I had taken out the VAT and the cost of the biscuits; there are no additional costs, or extra labour needed. So the benefits are pure cash profit). In other words over a year's trading, an additional cash profit of **£34,580!**
- Giving a total of **£130,580** pure cash profit each year.

According to Turnbull (2015), The probability of upselling to a new customer is 5–20%; whereas, the probability of upselling to an existing customer is 60–70%. Therefore, using very (very, very) conservative calculations, truly played into my hands. I could easily have used this matrix, and quoted some huge numbers, that would have seemed so large as to feel unattainable. Deliberately underselling the benefits, I could see the eyes of my client light up, as he made those calculations for himself!

And yes, he did become my client after that! How could he not?

Making It Relevant for WAMS Students

To bring this around to the theme of this book, some time later I had the privilege to be working for Nelson College London (a private college, with campuses in Redbridge, Ilford and Thanet). Being able to tell the hospitality students at Nelson College London [NCL] this real-life tale, it immediately engaged them; even more so when, as a class, we discussed how often they had been upsold to in a coffee shop (and said yes), and how often they had not. NCL teaches students at HND level, at FdA level, and, subsequently through a BA (Hons) Top Up and onto an MA (Level 4, through to Level 7); all these in both hospitality management and business management.

This engagement encouraged me to develop the concept further, culminating in my being able use it as an assessment criteria; with the students undertaking a practical, observational, activity across three different coffee outlets (of their choice), taking detailed notes on their observations and building these into recommendations. While it is essential to coach WAMS through the formality of written assessment, I found that with so many of these students exposed to, and participating in, more practical ways of working, that they

welcomed such tangible assessment methods. Assessing in such a way also constructed very concrete links between the subjects being studied and the workplace: students quickly grasped that such approaches and methods would have very real applications in future working environments.

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The Advantages and Disadvantages of LinkedIn

It may be argued that seeking out opportunities on LinkedIn has challenges; it is a global site and global opportunities will be shown. However, careful targeting of 'Follows' and 'Connections' will greatly enhance the likelihood of meaningful results being seen. Additionally, LinkedIn does not suffer as greatly from algorithm-skew as Facebook (Imana et al., 2021), making for more balanced, truly personalised, results. It is also recognised that individuals may be tempted to exaggerate their experience/role on LinkedIn to boost their own personal profile; this would be especially true if they are seeking new employment themselves. Similarly, companies and enterprises will be seeking to present themselves positively to attract high-grade employees. Thus, while LinkedIn content may be viewed as more balanced, given the breadth of people contributing to the site, than a company's own website, over which they have full control, that is not to say that LinkedIn content will be entirely without spin.

If the mature student is currently employed, they may not wish to advertise themselves as 'Open to Opportunities' on the site; having a concern how their current employer might react if they were to see this, even if the opportunity that they seek is in a different sector. LinkedIn cannot be claimed as the perfect solution to the recruitment conundrum, for employee or employer, but its place in the employability arsenal is valuable.

Creating an Engaging Profile

Students benefit from calling on the experience of their lecturing staff, particularly tutors for modules such as: Professional Identity & Practice (and/or similar

modules), or, alternatively, employability professionals within the institution, or both, seeking their mentorship and guidance when creating a LinkedIn profile, gaining their insight and helping them to focus on the key areas of:

1 Practical Skills Experience

The order in which sections appear in a LinkedIn profile:

- 1 About
- 2 Activity
- 3 Experience
- 4 Education
- 5 Licences & Certifications
- 6 Volunteering
- 7 Skills
- 8 Recommendations
- 9 Interests

- i When preparing a CV, work experience should come first, if it outweighs formal education. Conversely, it should be placed after education if it does not. It cannot be assumed that the mature student has bountiful work experience, if, for example, they have previously been a homemaker (*although, see 4. Soft Skills, below*). However, with LinkedIn, you cannot change the order in which things appear on a profile (see the text box). Therefore, the order in which things are presented in each section, particularly the **About** and **Activity** sections should still follow that basic guidance. The **Activity** section simply reflects the things that an individual has done on LinkedIn (Posts, Articles, Comments, etc.)

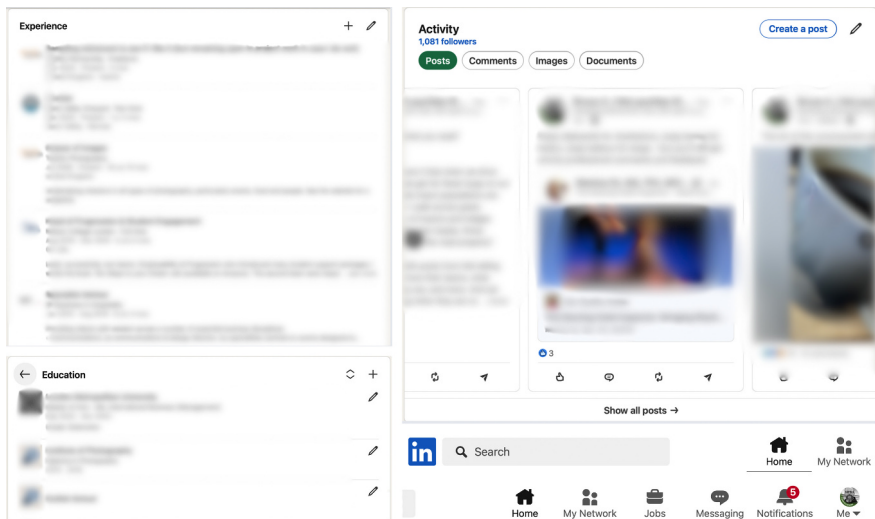


FIGURE 13.1 LinkedIn profile sections.

2 Education: Formal & Informal; Licences & Certifications

- i As with the CV, the highest level of education should appear first, an individual may have attended a training course more recently, but as far as practicable, this should not take precedence over their BA, MSc or equivalents.
- ii *Relevant* other education (language courses, first aid, computing, etc.) should also be included.

3 Recommendations

- i A particularly useful feature of LinkedIn is the Recommendations section. Individuals are able to ask colleagues, line-managers and connections to write a personal recommendation for them. The accepted convention is that this is a reciprocal process, with a request for a Recommendation being accompanied by an offer to write one for the other person.
- ii While these Recommendations are a valuable soft-Reference, they cannot be viewed as replacing the formal-Reference: these are public facing, and visible to all, therefore there will be a natural bias towards only highlighting the positive aspects of the individual. However, for the browsing employer, this still provides them with valuable insights into the individual: who has made the recommendation; what have they said in the recommendation; how recent was the recommendation; how many other recommendations are there?

4 Soft Skills Experience

- i In addition to employment experience, students will have gained a wide range of soft skills, through their workplace experience, and through managing things like a home, a club, undertaking voluntary work or working for a charity/good cause.
- ii Often, mature students will be using the qualification for which they are studying as a springboard to start a new career and moving into a new industry. From the point of view of a new employer, their past work experience may be of a lesser importance and for this reason, students need to consider how they report their past experience. They might have significant experience as a widget-maker but are now moving to a widget-free industry. It may be seen, then, that the direct skills gained from making widgets are now irrelevant; however, the indirect skills, particularly the soft skills, now take on an increased importance. These might be skills such as:

- Team working/Team leading.
- Motivating others.
- Influencing behaviours.
- Conflict resolution.

5 Entrepreneurial Skills

- i LinkedIn allows mature students to present more depth to their entrepreneurial skills than the two pages (or even one page) of the CV. Often, mature students will have a background of both depth and diversity; while this may be difficult to present logically on a CV, the various options available on LinkedIn provide more opportunity for this. In addition to focusing upon the Experience section and the Education section, mature students might also use the About section. Additionally, they might write a post or article that highlights, albeit in an oblique way, a particular experience, or reflects upon a skill, insight or opinion.

6 Key Achievements

- i These need not simply be presented in a textual way; both video and still images may be used as part of their presentation. For example, a graduation photograph, captioned ‘So proud to have achieved a Distinction’; or a short video of a training room during a course that you are attending, or a display/event that you have created for work².
- ii As a word of caution, students do need to understand that with LinkedIn, in common with other social media sites, the content needs to be dynamic, and therefore consistently refreshed. Publishing that graduation photo, and then nothing else for the next 18 months, might give the impression that the student has done nothing since then.
- iii On the other hand, it is also important not to bury those key moments! This may be seen as a challenge; however, one that may be overcome by reposting something as a memory (‘Was this really eighteen months ago?’); alternatively, through writing a post (‘How I have applied the learning from my BA in the workplace.’); or by making comment in support of someone else’s post.

7 Personal Profile

- i The mature student may bring their character and personality alive by demonstrating this through posts, articles and shares.

These factors may be shown in two principal ways:

- Firstly, the very CV-aligned sections headed ‘Experience’ and ‘Education’.
- Secondly, and with the opportunity to add depth, there is the section that is headed ‘Activity’.
- These should be planned to complement each other and should certainly not present conflicting information.

Common Pitfalls

As with the CV, there are certain errors and pitfalls to be avoided (Osoian and Zaharie, 2014; Shellenbarger and Chunta, 2007). One of the hardest of these can be the avoidance of buzzwords: exemplified by words such as ‘motivated’, ‘dedicated’, ‘team-player’ and so forth. Here the art of exemplary profile creation is the avoidance of claims around these words ‘I am a highly motivated individual.’ It is preferable to use a phrase or sentence that demonstrates that the individual is motivated, but ideally without using the word ‘motivated’. Instead, the user might write, ‘I took the initiative in this area, by...’; ‘I brought the project in ahead of the imposed deadline, through ensuring that...’. This is not different from the approach that should be taken in the creation of an effective curriculum vitae in fact it mirrors it.

There are now nearly as many users of social media as there are users of the internet *5.17B social media users/5.45B internet users* (Statista, 2024). Additionally, there are very grey lines between the content that people feel is appropriate for each of the sites, individually. Some will post identical content across all the major sites; others will be very specific and intentional about what they post where (Chambers, 2022). The previous empirical study demonstrated that with LinkedIn, in particular, a significant number of users felt that the site was devalued where users posted content that they deemed ‘more appropriate for Facebook’. Therefore, where these differing views exist, mature students would be well-advised not to treat LinkedIn in the same way as they do Facebook (or Instagram, or TikTok, etc.), but that they should be very intentional in their approach, considering only business-related content; alternatively, where they deem more social content as appropriate, that this is written with a different approach to that adopted for other social media sites.

The focus so far has been on encouraging regular use of LinkedIn by students, and their posting of regular updates, this is not guidance that should be blindly followed. It is equally important that they do not post just for the sake of it; considered, regular, but spread out, interactions will be more impactful than daily irrelevance. Writing for Elite Digital, Green (2017) in a piece entitled ‘How to Avoid ‘Inbox Blindness’ With Your Email Marketing’, identified the danger inherent in daily marketing e-mails. The same parallel may be drawn here with LinkedIn: the student is ‘advertising’ and ‘selling’ themselves through the media, and therefore that same ‘blindness’ must be recognised. Aaron Searle, writing in PR Weekly (2018) agrees, as does Statista, themselves, (2024).

Finally, mature students will need guidance on how to create engaging content and how they might achieve a balance between not posting anything too anodyne, but, equally, considering that while controversial is more engaging, how they must be careful on the choice of what that controversy might be.

We become blind to the things we see every day. Our eyes see things like billboards and cereal boxes and immediately (subconsciously) decide that we know about them already. Therefore, they are not worth our attention anymore.

Aaron Searle

The Benefits of Regular Networking

Sayan and Haffty, 2021 identify the benefits of starting early when it comes to the building of networks and connections. Effective networks take time to build (Alonso et al., 2021; Dotan, 2011; Maya-Jariego et al., 2019). For a network to be effective, it is not simply a question of numbers. While it may look impressive to have a large number of connections, the value of those connections comes from their relevance, from the relationships that the student is able to build with individuals and companies. Indeed, we might twist the old adage: ‘turnover is vanity; profit is sanity’ to read: ‘quantity is vanity; relationships are sanity’. Therefore, simply sending off dozens of connection requests in the hope of acceptance by many will not achieve the desired outcome in the long term.

A longer-term approach is recommended, before sending out those requests, as these will start to establish relationships. Some of the methods which may be employed include:

- Following people, and also companies in which the student is interested; however, still keep to the principle of meaningful, relevant ‘follows’ and avoid pursuing quantity, as noted above.
- Engage with people whom the student follows:
 - Comment on their posts and articles; this might be supporting their standpoint and agreeing with it. However, it could also include challenging their view, but make sure that this is done in a positive way. It would not be an appropriate response to simply say, ‘you are wrong.’ However, the article’s author is more likely to notice if someone makes a comment that opens: ‘I understand the viewpoint that you make, however, have you also considered... ..?’ There is a clear risk associated with this approach; however, the aim is to become memorable. This might be illustrated to students by asking them, who are you most likely to remember, someone who just agrees with you, or someone who offers an alternative viewpoint?
 - If the student has written an article themselves, on a similar topic, they might consider posting a link to it, with a comment such as: ‘I found your article highly insightful; you may be interested to read something that I wrote on the subject?’

- The introduction is a very effective networking tool; if a student notices that someone with whom they are interested in connecting with also has a mutual connection, then they might consider asking that mutual connection to introduce them.

Students should also consider a preceding stage to that detailed above. This involves a tool which mature students will have become increasingly familiar with as their studies have progressed: that of research and evaluation. Before diving into the following and the liking, there is benefit to building up impressions of companies, organisations and individuals. According to Reed (2022), up to 30% of employees leave a job within the first three months. Many of the reasons behind the statistic that they cite are connected with the company itself, the perks (or lack of them), the terms and conditions, etc. Most of these factors may be easily established *before* considering joining a company. Thus, with due research, students are easily able to avoid those awkward short-employment roles on their CV, by not joining in the first place a company whose terms and conditions, or their overall approach to business, are not shared by the student, or a match for the student's aspirations.

Support for Students from Academic and Faculty Employees

To support students in these areas, ensuring their desirable progression, institutions are able to offer support, particularly through a series of skills workshops. There are four initial stages to these, best delivered as four separate workshops:

- Workshop One: Creating a LinkedIn Profile
 - Following the guidance set out within this chapter, groups of between 8 and 12 students (determined mostly by the depth of the students' familiarity with IT, and with social media in general) should be gathered in an IT lab and taken through the setting up of a basic profile.
- Workshop Two: Maintaining a LinkedIn Profile
 - Once students have created their profile, the focus should shift to how best they continue to keep their profile fresh and relevant. This is achieved through the creation of regular posts, articles and comments. It may also be done through the sharing of posts and articles created by others on LinkedIn; this approach has the benefit of minimal activity by the student, other than ensuring that the item shared is accurate and reflects the student's own beliefs or approaches – or is used to prompt debate.
 - Top Tip: to allow students to practice, and hone, their approach in this area, they might be encouraged to create content to share with each other, and with academic staff, for constructive comment and feedback before they make 'live' postings.

- Workshop Three: Avoiding Perils & Temptations
 - Picking up on the guidance provided in the section *Common Pitfalls* offer students further support and guidance on the fine tuning of their profiles.
- Workshop Four: Creating Engaging Content
 - Experienced marketeers often struggle with achieving a balance between the extremes of ‘safe’/‘grey’ content, which readers/recipients might consider as boring and ‘controversial’/‘opinion’ pieces that run the danger of alienating readers/recipients. Thus, a workshop exploring a wide variety of content that has been posted by others on LinkedIn would form an excellent basis for a discussion-based event.
 - As with Workshop Two, an outcome from this workshop might be that of encouraging students to practice writing LinkedIn posts and sharing them with others in the group, or wider, before posting them ‘live’ onto LinkedIn.
- Further workshops may be added when other areas of support required by the participating students are identified.

AI: Friend of Foe?

AI has become a factor of daily life in 2024. So, should the mature student avoid it, or embrace it, in their employability search, and therefore on LinkedIn? As with many other tools, it is not the tool that is good (or evil), but the use to which it is put (Mackenzie et al., 2024; Karimi, 2024). With AI now fully commonplace, it would certainly be a mistake to avoid it entirely; it has a place in the business, commercial and educational worlds in the same way that the internet does. Therefore, to not understand it, and the use to which it may be put, is to miss an opportunity. But then, so too, would its overuse, or an overreliance on its services, detract from the value of the individual. Consider the writing of a post or article for LinkedIn. Asking an AI tool to, ‘write me a 500-word article on workplace motivation’, and then simply copying and pasting this, verbatim, would do no long-term favours for the individual. However, researching and writing an article on motivation, and then asking AI to check for grammatical accuracy may be argued as a sensible use of the tool; the same might be said if AI is used to suggest bibliographies, or the research questions themselves. As with all other content that mature students might consider placing on their profile, the avoidance of over-exaggeration, or categorical lying, should be avoided. Posting AI-generated articles would certainly fall into this area: an individual setting themselves up as qualified and knowledgeable in certain areas, only to be discovered as lacking by a potential, or new, employer, will quickly lose kudos, and, potentially, employment (Figure 13.1).

Conclusion

This chapter has explored one of the essential tools that students might turn to when it comes to building connections between the studies that they have undertaken and the world of work. Colleges and universities often build strong links with employers, in part to help to inform the content of the courses themselves and in part to support their students' future endeavours. The contents of this chapter create an additional bridge between these two bodies.

The chapter has explored a number of aspects of LinkedIn, from the practical aspects (the pros and cons and the dos and don'ts) to the benefits of the site. It has also set out a clear methodology for supporting mature students in creating and maintaining a dynamic profile, through the learning that they can receive through tailored workshops. Many of the approaches discussed will apply equally for students when they are undertaking research for the writing of dissertations; LinkedIn can be an effective location to undertake surveys for data gathering. It may, therefore, be seen that all students should be encouraged to set up a LinkedIn profile, building a relevant, effective, network takes effort, but it also takes time: Est postea quam putes [It is later than you think ...]

Notes

- 1 Soft-Services describes building services such as security, cleaning, catering, mail-room, printing, transport, etc.; this is in contrast to Hard Services, which are fixed to a premises, such as lighting, heating, plumbing, etc.
- 2 You should ensure that you have the permission of anyone who features in images or video to use them in the way that you intend; in some circumstances (or at the request of an individual), it may be appropriate to blur out faces – particularly if under-18s are featured.

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14

THE TRANSFORMATIONAL ROLE OF TUTORING AT THE AUTONOMOUS UNIVERSITY OF CHIHUAHUA

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Introduction

In the context of university education, tutoring includes the creation of peer tutors: students who provide academic support to their classmates. This experience has been successful in other universities and has proven effective in improving students' academic performance. In addition, this continuous tutor training has been recommended to improve abilities and knowledge of tutoring, considering students' opinions as a guiding reference for tutoring design, implementation, and operation at the Autonomous University of Chihuahua (UACH). The Institutional Tutoring Programme (PIT) can be a valuable tool to support mature students through their university experience. Trained tutors may provide academic, personal, and professional orientation to students, boosting their self-esteem, security, and learning. At UACH, we also consider training peer tutors, continuous tutor training, students' opinions, improving communication and promotion of the tutoring programme, and increasing tutoring offerings to cover more subjects and areas of study. We present recommendations to improve the tutoring system.

Review of the Literature

Definition of Tutoring: Concept and Historical Evolution

In the context of higher education, tutoring programmes are essential elements that have been created in response to the different challenges faced by students during their academic career paths. Bautista Valdivia et al. (2022) consider that tutoring programmes in higher education aim to improve

academic performance, decrease dropout, favour labour market orientation, and prevent problems that jeopardise the tutees' emotional and mental health during their education.

Internationally, these programmes have differences and similarities and are implemented in various countries worldwide. Rodríguez Pérez (2017) indicates that English and American universities promote individualised education. The teaching activity is diversified, incorporating tasks such as lecturing, working with small groups and personalised attention activities. The National Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutions (ANUIES, 2001) conducted different analyses in Hispanic American countries, recognising diverse experiences, and stated that in Mexico, tutoring appeared in the early 1940s at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), specifically in postgraduate studies at the School of Chemistry.

Clerici and Da Re (2019) observe that in current higher education, there is a transformation based on a renewed vision of the past where personalised attention occupies a privileged position. The authors present a study conducted in relation to three academic degrees at the University of Padua; the programme showed significant results, the school dropout rate was reduced by half, and academic performance improved, especially in terms of learning outcomes.

ANUIES (2001) defines tutoring as the systematic orientation provided by a professor in support of a student's academic progress according to their personal needs and requirements. However, this definition can be extended to recognise different tutoring types:

- I Individual tutoring. Support personalised to the student by the tutor, assisting them during their academic pathway.
- II Group tutoring. Support to a small group of students with affinities in general characteristics, interests, and problems.
- III Peer tutoring. Comprises students assisting other students to solve a problem or complete an assignment. This tutoring type takes advantage of outstanding students' capacities through an academic mentoring programme. Lepez and Simeoni (2023) present an analysis of this tutoring type in undergraduate nursing students in Brazil.

Tutoring Programme Objectives

According to the literature reviewed, the function of a tutoring programme is, firstly, improving academic performance and, secondly, preventing programme dropout (Hernández-Vargas et al., 2013). A range of studies present evidence of positive tutoring effects, such as Arco-Tirado et al. (2020) who reported an experiment with a sample of 102 first-year students at a university in Spain, finding a moderate effect size and statistically significant differences in favour

of the experimental group receiving tutoring in the total academic course, as well as in the fall and spring semesters.

On the other hand, Paredes-Ayrac et al. (2022) reported the results of academic performance and perception scores and reported that the application of a tutoring intervention programme was statistically significant, contributing to student performance improvement. Therefore, a conclusion was drawn that the tutoring and counselling programme directly influenced the performance of students who participated in the study, conducted through a quasi-experimental design in four professional degrees in Peru.

In the specific case of UACH, the main objectives of its PIT are:

- I Integral student education: integral education includes various elements, including, but not limited to, cognitive, affective, ethical, aesthetic, communicative, physical, social, and political aspects. As such, the PIT programme seeks to educate individuals with universal values, capable of communicating responsibly and empathising with others (UACH, 2023).
- II Supporting the teaching-learning processes to strengthen student support during their academic education process, providing orientation and support for individuals and groups (UACH, 2002).
- III Developing student potential: focus on developing student potential through tutoring, providing not only academic but also personal and professional support (UACH, 2023).

These objectives aim to guarantee successful student support, promoting their integral development and academic success.

Tutoring Programme Structure

Tutor Selection and Student Allocation

A purposeful starting point is assembling a professor-tutor task force. Romo López (2004) comments that the degree of participation of professors in the PIT is recorded. For that purpose, it is necessary to know the number of professors involved, their characteristics, and the criteria used to select tutors and allocate the target population of students. The author comments that there are different factors to be considered, such as membership of the area's academic groups, time availability, the number of hours of classroom instruction, experience, training, and student demands.

In the Autonomous University of Ciudad Juarez, Nuevo Casas Grandes campus, located in a small town in Northern Chihuahua with a population of 62,000, there are various student support services such as the Coordination of Student Orientation and Well Being (COBE) and the Integral Tutoring and Academic Pathway Programme (PITTA), promoting the assignment of tutors

since the first semester, with 100% coverage of the enrolled students (Hernández-Santiago et al., 2023)

In the Autonomous University of Chihuahua (UACH, 2023), the following procedures apply:

- The administration selects students' tutors.
- Students will have the option to select their tutor; allocation is subject to tutor availability.
- Students at risk are determined by a health evaluation (UACH, 2024), the Introduction Module, the CENEVAL exam and socioeconomic status assessment, and they will be assigned to a tutor.
- Low-performing students will be allocated to a tutor.
- A professor or academic secretary refers students.
- The Coordinator of Sports Activities will send the list of athlete students to be allocated to a tutor.
- All students of the Educational Inclusion and Equity Programme and those with high academic potential will be allocated a tutor.

Session Frequency and Duration

The literature shows a variety of different tutoring frequencies and durations; for instance, Scorsolini-Comin (2020) discusses a study where tutoring was offered for all classes of two courses, with weekly online meetings. The author reports that although the idea was to have tutoring being distinct from psychotherapy, conversation spaces may trigger therapeutic effects.

Romo López (2004) analysed the ratio of tutoring hours received by students. The distribution of students that received tutoring by session duration time, was as follows: 11% received attention for a time under 1 hour per month; 38.0%, between 1 and 2 hours; 18.0%, 2–3 hours; while 33% of students received attention amounting to between 4 and 5 hours per month.

At UACH, tutoring sessions must be held at least three times during a 6-month period, but if the conditions warrant it, tutoring sessions must be implemented as many times as necessary, upon the student's request or by the tutor's recommendation.

Tools and Resources Used

Tutoring programmes should use different tools from those used and provided by the institution or they may sometimes be funded by the tutor's own personal resources. An example of tools used for tutoring in higher education, Alvarez (2021) comments that it was possible to organise a set of tutoring sessions where the Coggle tool (a collaborative mind-mapping tool that simplifies complex information), was used to improve idea organisation and use of

information sources, resulting in improvements to the composition process. On the other hand, the use of Blackboard as a learning management system (LMS) was essential to support course development, as its highly intuitive interactive interface allowed students to adapt quickly. The virtual tutoring programme or e-tutoring has proven effective in improving students' academic performance, increasing average grades and raising the level of students with a pass grade.

According to Alcocer Martínez et al. (2021)), while the implementation of restrictive measures has presented new obstacles for tutoring programmes within the traditional university education model, student users have received a swift and positive acceptance of technological communication tools. This adaptation to technology is seen as beneficial for students participating in tutoring programmes, highlighting the flexibility and advantages digital tools bring to the educational landscape.

As a result of the recent pandemic, online tutoring sessions were implemented, and in this sense, Bautista Valdivia et al. (2022) note that the main challenge in this online education period was the construction of an information technology programme enabling tutoring sessions and communication between tutors and tutees to remain active.

UACH (n.d.) uses a tutoring digital platform in which each tutor processes the results of each meeting, and this platform serves as institutional evidence that tutoring sessions were held, thus being able to provide the teachers with some remuneration. In the case of online meetings, it is common to use programmes such as Google Meet, where group or individual sessions may occur.

Special Considerations for Mature Students

So far, the concepts and definitions described make no distinction between different types of students, though there are interesting characteristics that could be considered when analysing tutoring programmes in the context of mature-aged students, also called adult students: 'adult students as those who go back to school after a work, unemployment, or children rearing period' (Merriam and Brockett, 2007, p. 84). The definition of an adult student varies by country and educational institution. There is no consensus on the number of years someone must be out of school to be considered a mature student (Todo de Formación, 2017). Some countries, such as Ireland, consider mature students to be those older than 23 (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2021). According to Illanes et al. (2018), mature or adult students are those older than 25, who return to school after work, unemployment, or a child rearing period. Saddler and Sundin (2019) report that adult students comprise approximately a third of the higher education student population in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. More research is needed to understand the factors that could facilitate or hinder this group's access to higher education.

Crawford (2021) conducted research focused on mature students living or coming from regional, remote areas in Australia, finding that mature-aged students and students coming from remote, regional areas in Australia contribute a variety of experiences and skills to their university life, albeit with particular specific needs. The study reported that these students required some level of flexibility on the part of faculty and a personalised approach to communication. It also calls not for 'well-being' but for 'well-being events', and for proper execution of the 'basic aspects' of lecture design and delivery.

It is possible that mature students drop out because of shortages in tutoring programmes that could have addressed many factors, such as lack of social skills, family and health initiatives, low academic performance, and institutional context (Dabur Sánchez and Oria Segura, 2021). Academic tutoring programmes and formative activities to decrease dropout can help guarantee students' graduation rates and increase retention. Adult students are often not considered; Grierson (2023) analyses how a course on learning skills tackled transition, diversity, inclusion, and a sense of belonging for adult students attempting to enrol in a Canadian university. Participants expressed how valuable such a programme would have been in an undergraduate programme. In the Canadian context, it is unusual for a learning specialist to act as a course developer to create an undergraduate credit course.

In the UK, Jones and McConnell (2022), presented their research, arguing for it as an original contribution to knowledge through retrospective narrations of adult students developing a mentality of growth and determination before starting higher education, and how they became aware of and formed these characteristics in the university after the Changing Mindsets workshops and projects, which were funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. Block (2023) recognised the dropout crisis of part-time doctoral students, because of insufficient support and scarce supervision provided by doctorate schools. No more information on postgraduate students is presented, as their definitions of mature students coincide with undergraduate students. At UACH, postgraduate students have been integrated into tutoring programmes, with tutors being, at the same time, their thesis supervisors, facilitating close support throughout their programmes. Although there are some students in these programmes who recently finished undergraduate studies and are of young age, a majority are adult students who have been away from education for extended periods of study and are currently involved in work activities.

Discussion

In general, UACH's PIT is useful for adult students, as it provides academic, personal, and professional orientation for their integral development, permanence, and learning. Tutors are trained professionals who guide and provide counselling and support to students, helping with their self-esteem, security, and learning. In

addition, the PIT engages university authorities in resource management and administrating for tutor training, and students are responsible for attending tutoring sessions in a timely manner, participating actively and complying with the activities assigned by the tutor. Aspects of this approach include:

- I To be part of UACH's PIT, all professors interested must take a 480-hour diploma course.
- II To stay current, all professors must take courses offered by UACH's Professor Development Centre (CUDD); each course is 20 hours long.
- III There is permanent support from the tutoring coordinator, who holds a meeting each semester and ensures that meetings are entered into the system, which is held three times per semester.
- IV In case a situation arises that exceeds the tutor's capacity and/or attributes, UACH has a student support department, where students can receive medical, psychological, legal, and human rights advice.

In sum, the PIT has assumed an essential role in UACH's educational culture, contributing to both the student's academic and personal success, even of adult students. However, it is possible to identify some aspects that could be considered as improvement opportunities:

- I Some tutors do not take the programme seriously and they may simulate meetings or make little effort to contact their students. At any rate, being assigned at least 10 students is useful for the professor to meet certain administrative requirements which translate in the short term into monetary gains, as it grants them access to a stipend, which is additional to their salary and must be renewed every year.
- II It is not mandatory for students to attend the meetings; many of them ignore them completely or contact their tutor only when they have a problem. The most common issue is low performance in a subject that may cause failure, so they reach out to their tutor to seek their intervention and request that professors accept late assignments or provide additional opportunities for failed evaluations.
- III Despite PIT being useful for mature-aged students, there are no explicit special considerations for this kind of student. The type of attention or course of action is decided at the tutor's discretion, and it might depend on their professional background and personal experience.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Mature-aged students are an important population that higher education authorities must support. On the one hand, these students may already have certain abilities that mean they perform better than their peers, for instance:

- I They bring more extensive professional and personal experience to the university, allowing them to share unique knowledge and perspectives with their peers.
- II They are more motivated and may be more interested in learning and acquiring new competencies.
- III They are more diverse in terms of age, professions, and experiences, creating an enriching inter-generational environment.
- IV They have more understanding of the subjects they study, as they can relate them to their prior experiences and knowledge.
- V They have more emotional and psychological development.

On the other hand, these students could be challenged in relation to the following situations:

- I Prejudice and insecurity regarding their age and appearance may affect their confidence and class participation, making them feel out of place among a group of young, inexperienced students.
- II Difficulty in adapting to the university's teaching and learning methods, which may affect their academic performance.
- III For those who simultaneously have a job, conflicts with their current work or company schedules can arise, creating fear of low work performance and unemployment, which may affect their capacity to study full-time.
- IV Difficulty with online studies: although online courses may be an attractive option for mature-aged students, they could have issues in online learning because of their age and experience as part of a digital divide.

Tutoring programmes should consider the factors described above, take advantage of the strengths of mature-aged students and minimise their weaknesses, considering that each situation is unique and needs individual assessment. A possible strategy is assigning tutors to mature-aged students who have gone through a similar situation in the past, which may generate empathy and understanding from the tutor if they themselves interrupted their formal education for some time. It is also important to avoid the use of tutoring programmes as a tool to lower academic excellence, as many students could learn to use these programmes as resources that foster reduced effort and excellence. It is essential for teachers to identify those with the best profiles for this important work, preventing programmes from becoming only an administrative means to obtain points and increase the chances of more income through the performance stimuli scholarship programme.

These proposals concur with Lagarda-Lagarda et al. (2020), who propose the creation of a profile description evaluation system, including psychological and psychosocial resources that facilitate dealing with students, maintaining an emotional-instrumental balance in the family-work relationship, promoting an identity process with the educational institution.

Finally, because of the analysis above, the following actions will be proposed for UACH:

- I Formation of peer tutors: students who provide academic support to their classmates, and this action could be carried out with mature students.
- II Reinforcing continuous tutor training, including practical workshops, differs from current courses, which focus more on theoretical factors.
- III Getting students involved in programme improvement, as a guide for tutoring design, implementation, and operation. This could include surveys, discussion groups, and other mechanisms to collect student comments and suggestions.
- IV Improving communication and promotion of the programme so students are more aware of available tutoring services, and finding mechanisms to prevent students from not attending tutoring sessions.

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15

A COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY STUDY – MATURE STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCE

Damien Homer

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Introduction

Within Higher Education (HE) settings, mature students can bring a richness of knowledge, experience, and life histories, which may yield valued contributions to university experience (Chapman, 2013). The numbers of mature students who study in the UK is on the rise again (Hubble and Bolton, 2021), after a drop in numbers following the changes in the 2012 student funding reforms (Callender and Thomson, 2018). There was significant growth of mature students entering HE during the Covid-19 period, as well as people choosing to study because of a period of economic recession, although it should be recognised that mature students are still a minority group, with 37% of undergraduates being considered within this category (Bolton, 2023). In the United Kingdom (UK), the definition of a mature student is that the individual must be over 21 years of age when they commence undergraduate study, or over 25 years old when they commence postgraduate study (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2020).

It is recognised that mature students often have very different experiences within HE settings, with many commuting to their institutions, having familial and working responsibilities, and significant financial commitments (Office for

Students, 2021). Mature students have been described as in many respects being ‘time poor’ (Reay et al., 2002: 9), with a recognition that many policies and cultures within HE institutions are catered towards those who have recently left school (O’Shea, 2018; van Rhijn et al., 2023).

Other researchers have framed the mature student experience as undertaking a ‘classic hero’s journey, as demonstrated by the challenges and trials of managing family, paid work and study, as they negotiated through the foreign land of university’ (O’Shea et al., 2024: 212). There is also a recognition that many mature students come to HE after periods of not studying which can also impact on their confidence, sense of belonging and a lack of an academic identity (Jones and McConnell, 2023; *Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education*, 2021).

There can also be an oversimplification in stereotypical views of mature students within HE (Mallman and Lee, 2016), focussing on a deficit approach, which fails to recognise ‘valuable characteristics, such as passion and personal experiences’ (Dunn, 2019: 29). Hockings (2010: 3) suggests that this deficit view can lead to thinking that non-traditional learners, such as mature students, ‘are also believed to require additional resources and are seen as more problematic than their “traditional” peers’. Contrary to this view, Shanahan (2000) argues that mature students can demonstrate a deeper approach to learning, and Tones et al. (2009: 506) posit that there is a ‘superior academic performance of mature-aged students’. HE can be a transformational experience for mature students (Pearce, 2017) as they seek to navigate their way to a ‘better life’ (Broadhead, 2018). This quest for self-development and fulfilment often underlines the need for study so that mature students can gain more secure employment or develop skills which can help them support themselves, and their families (Fuller, 2001).

Mature Students and Online Learning

Traditionally, distance and online learning has been defined as teaching and learning where the student and lecturer are separated from each other (Kentnor, 2015). With its roots in correspondence education, online learning is said to have first started in 1981 (Harasim, 2000) and has also developed and evolved to include notions of e-learning and blended learning (Joksimović et al., 2015). In the UK HE system, institutions such as the Open University have long provided degree programmes through the use of the internet (Blackledge, 2021), and these have been accessed by a variety of students, but with a recognition that ‘online students are less likely than on-campus students to be school-leavers, and more likely to be older, mature-age learners’ (Stone, 2019: 2).

From early 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic forced many HEIs to pivot their pedagogical practice to meet the needs of students (Tadesse and Muluye, 2020). In many respects this brought online learning further into the mainstream, as

most universities had to find solutions to the restrictions imposed on face-to-face delivery (O'Shea et al., 2024). However, as other authors have noted, choosing to study online is one thing – being forced to do so because of the pandemic is another matter (Turnbull et al., 2021). While there is evidence that developing countries have been affected more severely (UNESCO, 2020), university students in the UK had to quickly adapt to online teaching and learning (Burki, 2020). As campuses closed across the UK through the pandemic, the absence of face-to-face teaching (or extremely limited periods of interaction) meant that virtual learning platforms (VLEs), online communication platforms, and other web-based learning technologies (Bower and Torrington, 2020) became increasingly vital as the emergency situation unfolded (Narayan et al., 2020).

The growing use of technology-enhanced learning (TEL) over the last 20 years demonstrates that mature students have become increasingly used to accessing some of their learning online (Henderson et al., 2015). While there is a perception that mature students are more concerned about using technology in their learning (Staddon, 2020), others note that we should be cautious in making overly simplistic arguments about older students engaging in the use of digital tools (Pearce, 2017; Laming et al., 2019). The research presented here sought to understand the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on a group of mature students in one university in the UK. The research seeks to understand how students reacted to the pandemic pedagogy (Schwartzman, 2020) and what they perceived as the challenges, and opportunities, that the forced closure of the university presented to them.

Theoretical Framework

This study applied notions of Community of Inquiry (CoI) as a framework for analysis of the mature student experience of online learning during the pandemic. The model was seen by the researchers as an appropriate lens to investigate the mature student experience as it enabled an exploration of a community of learners through specific time frame, and an unprecedented turn to new ways of studying (Dumitru, 2012). CoI is rooted in Dewey's (1938) concepts of social constructivism (Castellanos-Reyes, 2020), in which learning is considered as a social activity whereby we construct knowledge in conjunction with, and alongside, teachers and peers (Swan, 2019). This model of studying the complexities of online learning is borne out of research by Garrison et al. (1999), which 'outlines critical dimensions that influence student-learning experiences in an online environment' (Kim and Gurvitch, 2020). The CoI model sees the online learning experience as having three overlapping components which are social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence (Richardson et al., 2012).

Garrison (2007: 63) states that social presence is 'the ability to project oneself and establish personal and purposeful relationships'. Social presence has

also been linked to an ability to feel connected (Rettie, 2003; Tu and McIsaac, 2002) and the capacity to identify with a group to enable personal relationships (Garrison, 2016). Cognitive presence is defined by Garrison, et al. (1999: 89) as the extent to which participants are 'able to construct meaning through sustained communication', which should be collaborative and involve the ability to express one's thoughts, but also time to think and listen to others (Garrison, 2017). The last component of the model is teaching presence, which includes not only how online learning is organised and put together, but also 'the facilitation of learning, and direct instruction' (Swan, 2019: 61).

CoI has been adapted over the last 20 years and is used in many different contexts and studies of online learning, but it is also not without its critics. Previous researchers have argued that there should be additional 'presences' within the model, but as yet there is no agreement to what these should be (Kozan and Caskurlu, 2018). Castellanos-Reyes (2020) notes that most studies have been conducted in American and Canadian settings, while Annan (2011: 42) argues that CoI 'does not adequately inform the development of online education theory and practice'. Furthermore, CoI's application to students' online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic is still relatively under-researched (Banerjee et al., 2020; Patwardhan et al., 2020), as is an understanding of the mature student experience during this unusual academic period (Anderson, 2021). However, as Kim and Gurvitch (2020: 397) state, 'CoI originated as a framework for assessing the quality of online learning experiences' and this has been the most unfamiliar HEI experience in years for both staff and students, as they adapted to an emergency situation (Patwardhan et al., 2020). Applying the three CoI presences in relation to the qualitative interview data (Kucuk and Richardson, 2019) will provide a framework to explore the mature student experience during the pandemic.

Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was employed for this research study (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). The sample was sought from students who identified as being mature and who were studying at the university where the internally funded project was situated. The researchers sought participants from across the university who were recruited from a variety of means, including: email, digital newsletters, and internal departmental communications. Mature students volunteered to take part in the study and were given a book voucher for their time. All students who responded to the call for participants were asked to participate in the study. The participants were from a range of backgrounds, ages, and experiences, and they were all enrolled on either undergraduate or postgraduate programmes, either in a full- or part-time capacity. The criteria for selection meant that the students had to be over 21 years old (for undergraduate study) or over 25 years old (for postgraduate study) to take part in the

interview process. The students studied a range of subjects, some were part of departments such as the Centre for Lifelong Learning (CLL) and others were in disparate subjects such as Psychology or Linguistics (see Table 15.1).

Twenty participants volunteered to be interviewed, 75% of the interviewees were female, and the remainder (25%) were male. The interviewees were between the ages of 23–71: 20% were under 35, 75% were between 36 and 65 and 5% over 70 years of age. The interviews were conducted over a 3-month period in 2021 and were conducted on the online platform, Microsoft Teams.

Methodology

The research study used semi-structured interviews, with a predetermined set of questions, but with a degree of flexibility to ensure that issues and matters that were important to the participants could be explored fully (Given, 2008).

TABLE 15.1 Characteristics of Study Participants

<i>Name^a</i>	<i>Level of Study</i>	<i>Subject</i>	<i>Age Bracket</i>
Kathy	Undergraduate	BA Social Studies	46–55
Carolyn	Undergraduate	BA Social Studies and Counselling	46–55
Wendy	Undergraduate	BA Social Studies	36–45
Timothy	Undergraduate	BA Social Studies	56–65
Kaylee	Undergraduate	History	26–35
Stacey	Undergraduate	History and English	56–65
Lena	Undergraduate	BA Early Childhood Studies	46–55
Diane	Undergraduate	BA Social Studies (Philosophy major)	36–45
Nathan	Undergraduate	biomed, Life sciences	18–25
Cameron	Postgraduate	IER PhD	56–65
Kelly	Undergraduate	Person centred therapeutic relationship degree	46–55
Anna	Undergraduate	Social Studies CLL	56–65
Ivy	Undergraduate	CLL – BA in Social Studies (majoring in Sociology)	26–35
Monica	Undergraduate	CLL Health and Social Policy	36–45
Rebecca	Postgraduate	BA Education	46–55
Paul	Postgraduate	MSc in Intercultural Communications for Business and the Professions	70+
Carmen	Postgraduate	MSc Intercultural communications for business and professions – Applied Linguistics	36–45
Marc	Undergraduate	BA (Hon) Social Studies	56–65
Lela	Other	PhD, History	36–45
Joyce	Undergraduate	PAIS	18–25

^a Please note these are pseudonyms

The interviews were conducted by two researchers, one of whom was a member of staff at the university (and a former mature student) and the other an undergraduate at the university (who was a current mature student). We concur with Mann and Stewart (2001), who argue that mutual trust is essential for developing good rapport with interviewees. To this end, we explained our positions as a former, and current, mature student to participants before the interviews took place. This was in part to demonstrate our receptivity, but also to recognise the often sensitive nature of participants reflecting on their own personal lives and educational journeys. The interviews were also conducted with constructivist principles, acknowledging that interviewees and interviewers ‘share the goal of understanding the complex world of the lived experience from the point of view of those who live it’ (Schwandt, 1994: 118). Before the interviews were agreed upon, each participant was given a participant information leaflet, which outlined the process, and a consent form. These measures ensured that the research was conducted within ethical guidelines (BERA, Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, 2018).

Data Analysis

The qualitative data from the interviews was first transcribed and then processed using the data analysis software Nvivo and the data was coded using a thematic approach (Charmaz, 2014). The analysis of the data was formed from the words the participants spoke during the interviews, by using a systemic approach of revisiting the data and creating codes (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Through the data analysis process twenty-three codes were identified, which then led to four emergent themes. There was no preconceived hypothesis, but instead the coding and subsequent development of themes were borne out of emerging patterns in the data set (Smith and Davies, 2010). The themes were then applied to the overarching theoretical framework, CoI. The components that make up the CoI model: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence (Garth-James and Hollis, 2014) are examined in relation to the views that the students expressed about their learning online during the pandemic.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with the students. Their identity is protected in these findings with anonymised verbatim quotations and the use of pseudonyms (Given, 2008). The aspiration of using these measures was to provide reassurance for the participants, but also to create a safe space where they felt able to talk freely without any concerns about any possible negative effects on their future university careers (Broadhead, 2020).

Findings

Some of the participants who took part in this research study had started their studies during the pandemic (thus had only known their courses to be blended

or online); others had experiences of face-to-face delivery at the start of their courses but then had recently had to pivot to online working the majority of the time. However, all participants had at least 12 months' experience of the online, blended learning approach. The university where the study was based continued to offer a small element of face-to-face delivery (usually seminars) where lockdown rules and governmental rules allowed (Nerantzi, 2020). It is acknowledged that this was, in many respects, a new experience for both university staff and the students, but also that it was an emergency, temporary situation (Nordmann et al., 2020). It should also be noted that this study concentrated on the mature student experience, and that the challenges facing older students can substantially differ from their younger peers (Laming et al., 2019). It is arguable that these issues were exemplified during the pandemic with parents facing additional challenges as UK schools closed and 90% of children were home schooled (sample size of 2,450; Office for National Statistics, 2021).

Adapting to Online Learning

For many of the participants the move to online learning was difficult, there was a perception that the younger students made the process of interaction during synchronous sessions restrictive:

Most of the problem we had on our lectures and seminars was (that) people didn't put their cameras on and didn't interact. And actually as a mature student that just, we just didn't do that. I was always like, camera on, interact, put my hands up, I'm like well if you're not gonna talk I'm going to ask the questions 'cause I wanna know the answers.

(Rebecca)

Most of the other student participants shared the frustration of trying to study online, and felt that it was not the same positive comparable experience to face-to-face delivery:

I've not learned as much. Uh, you know, trying to learn on Teams is really hard, especially when most of the 19- and 20-year-old students. They don't want their cameras on, so you can't.....yeah, it's a poor experience. It's a very poor imitation.

(Timothy)

The issue of being unable to see the other students face-to-face within the online environment was a key concern for the mature students. It was felt by a large number of the participants in this study that when students had their cameras on it led to a more conducive and open discussion forum, rather than seeing a blank screen:

One (module) was so painful because by this time we're obviously all on, Zoom or Teams, the other students wouldn't have their mics on or the cameras on and so going forward into year two, I'm not doing another module with younger students because I just did not enjoy the experience.

(Kelly)

The reasons for students having their cameras (and microphones) off during online synchronous classes is a complex matter, with some arguing that it should not be a requirement because of issues of privacy and comfort in what is already a stressful and anxious pandemic situation (Castelli and Sarvary, 2021). However, most participants in this study felt that it impeded their ability to have a social presence and did not support the feelings of social and emotional connections with their classmates (Richardson et al., 2012). Other studies (Whiteside et al., 2017) have demonstrated how the virtual meetings where people can see each other on screen increases the immediacy and intimacy that individuals feel.

Examples of positive teaching presence were also discussed by some of participants, where the staff had clearly put a lot of time and effort into adapting their teaching materials to ensure they would work in the online space, as Ivy describes:

I had another module where the tutor, oh my goodness, I don't how many hours she must spend working on this module, it is mind-blowing. Like to get it all online. It was so interactive. She put so much thought and effort in. Yeah, that it was absolutely incredible.

The remodelling of entire degree courses to work online has been a challenge for many staff who teach in universities, with a realisation that designing synchronous and asynchronous learning is time consuming (Nordmann et al., 2020). There was a recognition from some participants that moving online has had benefits, particularly for mature students:

I would never have been able to do this master's part-time, had it not been a pandemic, because my classes were like Monday 10am till 11am, Tuesday... like they were spread across the week and I would literally never, I would have had to take a year off work to do it full time, which I couldn't have done.

The time to study is often a key concern for mature students, who often have a wider range of responsibilities, such as parenting and caring commitments, than their younger peers (Norton et al., 1998). The pivot to online, blended, learning meant that students could access their subjects when it suited them:

You know it's been great to have online lectures and watch them in bits in my own time, and also I've really enjoyed working with some of the younger students on the programme.

(Paul)

Some students advocated their studies staying online, with Ivy advocating for a continued 'hybrid approach':

I think it's really important just to be able to access the papers online. Makes such a difference because there's five floors in that library. And I've got 20 minutes until I've got to go and pick the kids up from school, like... I can't, I don't have the skills, knowledge, or time to scour the whole flippin' place.

While it is perhaps a generalisation to say that mature students need more technical support than others (O'Driscoll et al., 2010), a student gave an example of where her peers had provided a social presence to ensure that she could continue with her online lesson:

I had to say, can you just help me I'm a bit of a technophobe. I don't know how to do this, and they were really, really kind with me. This is my other students, even though they weren't chatty or communicative, they were very, you know. Just let me be a bit more there. A bit more patient with me trying to sort out the technology.

Participants gave further examples of peer support where they used digital technology to communicate with each other, outside of the formal networks provided by the university.

Well, I socialize within my group...we have WhatsApp and we have various things on Facebook where we keep in contact. You know outside of the classroom.

(Marc)

Having that support, having some, you know, in a little WhatsApp group if you're worried about something, you could ask, what do you think about this? Do you know where this is? That was absolutely brilliant. We all brought something to that group and helped each other, and that was really important for me. Going through again, I think I would have struggled quite a lot if it hadn't been for that.

(Rebecca)

These examples of cognitive presence, where students can exchange knowledge and connect with each other and new ideas, were often done on an informal ad

hoc basis, outside of the university structures. This informal peer-to-peer feedback helps contribute to cognitive presence and supports an increase in social presence (Sun et al., 2017).

Relationships

The start to university had been unprecedented for some of the mature students who took part in this study. The ability to form relationships, and friendships with other students on their courses had been difficult for the majority of the participants. For example, Carmen stated that:

I think it is group work really where we missed out on kind of making friends because if I'd been able to come to some of the lectures, even if it only been like once a week, maybe then I would have at least seen everybody, and we'd have been able to hang out after class a little bit and things like that.

Other students who had studied at the university before the pandemic found that they had limited opportunities to interact during this online experience:

I don't think I know anyone this year on my course. No, I mean, I know I don't know anyone that's on my calls and it's not, this is just not the same. And yeah, I think it would have been nice to get - and maybe it will come back, it's probably just a remote working thing, rather than a course thing, hopefully.

(Anna)

The development of relationships, and friendships, with peers while studying at university can be integral to mature students' sense of identity (O'Boyle, 2014). When mature students do not form these bonds, it can lead to feelings of insecurity and isolation (Stuart, 2006), while social isolation can seriously affect the attainment of students at university (Doman and Roux, 2010). Many of the students who took part in this study had felt they were committing to a face-to-face degree programme, but the pandemic had severely impacted on their ability to converse with their peers, even when they did manage to go into the university:

I did feel though that it made life a bit difficult in terms of bonding with other students and having seminars, because actually saying that, while I did go in for some seminars at the beginning of the first term that was actually worse because we were all spread out in a lecture theatre, facing the front with masks on and there was just no backward and forward, and nobody wanted to speak.

(Rebecca)

Rapidly designing and delivering degree programmes during an unprecedented academic year, with changing government advice, and an emphasis on blended learning has undoubtedly been challenging for academic staff (Hodges et al., 2020). However, to support social presence greater emphasis could be placed on activities online and face-to-face interactions, which encourage students to share their personal experiences, which may be supported by more structured learning activities (Richardson et al., 2017).

External Factors

It is well understood that mature students have layers of additional responsibilities that other younger students may not (Sutton, 2019), and that these issues have been exemplified during the pandemic as home schooling and home working became the norm (Cheng et al., 2021). Within this study there were some parents whose experience of university had been impacted by responsibilities outside of the classroom:

Oh God, we struggled... it was just day by day really. You know some days the kids just pretty (much) wouldn't do it. They just wouldn't have it. Some days I got really upset. And some days I just shut the door and my husband would try and entertain them while I got on with some.... It was just, it was massive and a real struggle.

(Kelly)

I'm working at honours level now but not very competently truth be told, this has been a bit of a nightmare of a year. Its fine, like I've passed, but it, yeah, not what I wanted really, and I've gotta resit for the research project because that was just a bridge too far with home schooling.

(Ivy)

Childcare commitments were an issue for a number of mature students, and some expressed concerns about the pressure associated with having to study and care for others:

That element of pressure for mature students to look after children to continue to work and to maintain the same standard at university that they were maintaining before online and not in person, it was a huge ask really.

(Kelly)

Some other participants had wider caring responsibilities, which had caused issues:

That the pandemic came at a point where us as a family were already sort of struggling and drowning with various different things with my husband's health and so it has really impacted. Because it's impacted, you know, and I'm being stretched even thinner because he's out of action. I'm caring for him, then the kids are at home, and home schooling and running a house and not being able to leave the house and all those different things.

(Monica)

So like you know, my parents don't like require care, like they're still pretty independent. But like in the last couple of years, like I've had to deal with, my mom breaking her hip. You know, not healing properly, her being in like incredible pain, and to have a hip replacement during Covid which was a nightmare.

(Nathan)

I've got very elderly parents, so I can't afford to, well, I couldn't afford to get Covid myself at my age or pass it on to my parents, and so I'd already spoken to them about my concerns of coming in.

(Kelly)

These responsibilities are often taken on by mature students quietly and with a reluctance to share concerns with staff at the university (Marandet and Wainwright, 2013). The combination of face-to-face and online learning approaches was difficult for some mature students to adapt to when coupled with wider obligations. The development of cognitive presence requires space for learners to reflect, explore ideas, and have a discourse with fellow students (Gibson et al., 2012), alongside many of the competing demands placed upon mature students. It could be inferred that the opportunities for collaborative learning were reduced by the restrictions around the external responsibilities faced by mature students.

Response of the University

Many mature students had not intended to enrol on a course which offered so much online content, this was an unprecedented shift in an extraordinary situation (Means and Neisler, 2021). As one of the participations (Nathan) stated 'starting (university) in a pandemic is not anyone's optimal situation.'

Some students discussed how they accessed support from the university for extra time, or extensions on their deadlines, which were generally well received:

I just think they have tried to move heaven and earth in the last couple of years to accommodate and to make sure that everybody.....they're trying to level out the playing field.

(Kelly)

I have had a deadline moved because of all the children home during lock down and there was no questions asked about that, it was just granted to me.
(*Rebecca*)

This degree of flexibility was arguably essential when students faced mounting pressures to deal with multiple competing demands on their time. Mature students often assume more responsibility for their studies (Briedenhann, 2007), often using skills they have learnt during other periods of their lives. Similarly, in CoI classrooms (Stover and Ziswiler, 2017) relationships with staff at the university can lead to a sense of caring within their course communities (Stodel et al., 2006).

Other students had different experiences, and felt more could have been done:

I think a lot of academics this year they seem to...there's a lot of like, oh, it's really difficult for us this year. It's like, it's really difficult for us too, and it feels like there's a lot of, like, we're being asked to cut them some slack and we don't get any slack. If anything, we are expected to work harder.
(*Nathan*)

But I feel like they really needed to step up even more with Covid and they haven't really and then they should be putting more (support) 'cause this is going to have a knock on effect for years to come.
(*Monica*)

Other students discussed further support that could have been given, perhaps more of a 'safety net' (Cameron), with a recognition that mature students 'need different levels of support and different levels of help, and we shouldn't pretend that, you know, everybody is the same' (Anna). Teaching presence during blended learning approaches is vital if students are to feel supported and confident in seeking help (Martzoukou and Kemp, 2016). There have been considerable efforts by teaching staff in organising and delivering blended learning, which even outside of a worldwide health crisis can take considerable effort. Teaching presence is significant in supporting students to achieve, even outside of the online learning environment (de la Varre et al., 2011) therefore the university emphasis on the whole student experience is important, even in an emergency pivot to blended learning.

The desire to 'retain some traditional ways of learning' (Lam, 2015) may have impacted on some mature students' ability to feel part of the learning community in which they felt like they belonged to an institution or part of their course peer group (Tu and McIsaac, 2002). The sudden move to blended learning meant that some students were not necessarily taking part in the education experience they were originally intending to do, with the inherent

biases that some feel towards online or distance education as being a poor substitute for face-to-face learning (Oyarzun et al., 2021). Multiple participants reiterated the desire for moving back to learning at the university, for example:

I think we need to get back on campus or back to face-to-face (learning) because if we wanted to do remote learning we would all signed up for the Open University.

(Timothy)

While there was a clear desire from most students to get back to face-to-face learning, a few students were also keen to ensure that a ‘hybrid approach’ (Ivy) continued as there were clear benefits for those with complex, competing commitments, as Kaylee stated: ‘when they’re mature, they’ve got more responsibilities.’ The mixture of online and face-to-face delivery was seen by many participants as a way of fitting in university study around a busy life ‘it’s been great to have online lectures and watch them in bits in my own time’ (Paul).

Discussion

This research concentrated on the mature students’ experience of studying during the pandemic. The findings demonstrated that, although the students had differing experiences, in many respects they had all succeeded as they were continuing in their respective studies, and while some had used the university’s deferral systems (e.g. mitigating or extenuating circumstances), none had left the university. By using the CoI as a framework it has been possible to examine where the three categories of presence were within their blended study experiences (Swan et al., 2009). From the data analysis four themes were identified: Adapting to online learning, Relationships, External factors, and Response of the university. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we found that the unexpected pivot to online and blended learning has been challenging for some students, while for others it has had advantages, they may not have envisaged. For the majority of participants who took part in this study, the move online was understood as essential due to the pandemic, but perhaps not welcomed.

From a technological perspective the move to blended learning was not found to be difficult for most of the mature participants, the use of online platforms and working practices were relatively straight forward (Burgess, 2008). Unlike in other studies there were no major issues identified with accessing the internet, or IT equipment (Coyner and McCann, 2004), rather there was identification of the loneliness and isolation which can be found from studying online (Luyt, 2013). With more time available for course design and preparation, further consideration could be given to ways in which social presence can be built more effectively for mature students (Kear et al., 2014).

It could also be hypothesised that due to mature students expecting, and being more familiar, with traditional face-to-face learning, the move to synchronous class sessions with videoconferencing platforms was frustrating for some of the participants when they could not physically see or hear their peers (Reich et al., 2020). This hindered their ability to feel like they were part of the group, which in turn resulted in frustration and feelings of the impersonal, which did not endear the platforms to the older students and demonstrated a lack of social presence (Kear, 2010). Most of the students used informal social media platforms to create a cognitive presence with each other during the pandemic. This use of technology outside of the university's sphere helped them to feel supported and was important in their ability to stay connected with their peer group.

This research also discovered that students understood where staff had worked to provide teaching presence, and the effort they had put into pivoting the learning to a blended approach (Shea et al., 2006). Conversely, there was also a feeling amongst some participants that more empathy should have been given to the students during the pandemic, and that at times the university could have done more to support them during these uncertain times (Aini et al., 2020). This type of support could have been extended to further instruction on how to take part in blended learning, as well as more opportunities for online social activities between students, which may have helped alleviate some of the feelings of loneliness.

The multiple responsibilities that the mature students faced during the pandemic, from caring for others to home schooling, arguably acted as barriers to engagement at times and decreased the ability of the students to feel 'group cohesion (social presence), and greater engagement with course materials and assignments (cognitive presence)' (Majeski et al., 2018). As the findings of this research have demonstrated, the mature student experience is often multifaceted and multi-layered, with levels of responsibility that are often unseen and underestimated.

Conclusion

This research found that mature students at the university struggled with aspects of the emergency pivot to online learning, but they, like many other learners across the country, adapted and saw some positive outcomes in what was doubtlessly one of the most difficult times to study at university. The complexities of mature student experience meant that they had more caring commitments to contend with, in comparison to their younger peers. Although some struggled with isolation and fears of loneliness, mature students valued the human, personal, contact with their peers and staff, and were looking forward to a more 'conventional' university experience. However, the blended learning approach had clear benefits for those with competing demands on

their time, and lessons should be learnt about the more valuable aspects of online learning for mature students.

For 20 years CoI has been used as a model for analysis of different modes of the online learning experience (Castellanos-Reyes, 2020). While this research study has helped to provide insight into the mature student experience through the lens of CoI, it should be recognised that this was a small-scale study, based in one institution in the UK. However, it is clear that mature students place a significance on collaborative learning and their personal development where they have opportunities to share their understandings with each other (Zhang, 2020). It is hoped that as we further expand our understanding of the impact of the Covid pandemic, mature students can find opportunities in both the online and traditional learning spaces, to thrive and succeed in through their educational journeys.

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16

SUPPORTING MATURE STUDENTS LONGITUDINALLY ACROSS THE ACADEMIC LIFECYCLE

Gemma Standen

Context of Mature Student Engagement in Higher Education

Historically, mature students in the UK engaged with educational opportunities through polytechnic colleges, which supported both work-based training routes and classroom-based provision (Office for Students (OfS), 2021). However, over the past two decades, the number of mature students in Higher Education (HE) has declined in the UK (Butcher, 2017). From the late 1960s until 1992, polytechnics were deemed as providing viable routes into jobs and appealed to those who may not traditionally progress into university, providing technical education at an advanced level. Polytechnics offered full-time and part-time courses alongside work-based learning options, helping to bridge a growing demand for HE. However, by the late 1980s, polytechnic institutions ‘had become universities in all but name’ (Wilson, 2022). The Further and Higher Education Act (1992) eliminated the division between polytechnics and universities, and polytechnics acquired the university title as well as degree awarding powers, thus joining pre-1992 universities in a unified system (Department of Education and Skills, 1991). Polytechnics, much like further education colleges (FECs), catered more to local communities and offered a range of qualifications, which included advanced courses at higher levels. Pratt (1997) highlights that in the 1960s, students on a mixture of part-time courses were in their ‘tens of thousands’ (p. 42) but notes that retaining these students was challenging. Over the course of the next two decades, the number of people taking up part-time study dwindled substantially, leading to fewer available options. Consequently, later in the 1990s, when the concept of Widening Participation (WP) was introduced following the Dearing (Education England, 1997a) and Kennedy (Education England, 1997b) reports, more focus was

placed on supporting school leavers to progress into HE. This change impacted mature student numbers further as rhetoric shifted to support progression of young people, with interventions limited to those aged under 25 (Hargreaves, 2004). The introduction of WP was coupled with universities charging fees (Callender and Dougherty, 2018), which Molesworth et al. (2011) describe as seeing the UK enter a marketised system where delivery of HE provision became a matter of public interest, with the government paying more attention to the quality and delivery of courses (Taberner, 2018). Butcher (2020) attributed the overall drop in part-time study opportunities to the decline in mature students in HE, as many of those choosing to study part-time were mature students.¹ Butcher (2020) also notes that the steep rise in tuition fees in England disproportionately affected older and part-time students, projecting the HE sector as being more exclusive and less flexible for those balancing work and other responsibilities.

Universities which charged fees were obligated to work regionally to widen participation from groups underrepresented in HE, focusing on areas of low progression as well as underrepresented groups in education. Examples of the type of demographics include those from areas of low progression (based on POLAR – Participation of Local AREas – quintiles²) as well as specific underrepresented groups. Universities were responsible for highlighting areas of concern within their own regional context through an annual access agreement, detailing what interventions were being delivered to increase participation from groups underrepresented regionally (Department for Business Innovation and skills (DBIS), 2016). For context, strategies that target students pre-access are described as ‘Outreach’ and those aimed at underrepresented groups within HE are referred to as WP. Outreach interventions often target schools and colleges, offering Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) in the form of programmes and events to highlight university level study as a potential option. This type of Outreach has been intrinsic in diversifying university student bodies and improving social mobility regionally, but typically have not included those outside of compulsory education and within the local community (Thomas, 2012, 2017). Butcher (2017) has been lobbying for greater response from the British government to tackle the decline in mature student numbers through targeted Outreach initiatives. The number of 18-year-olds entering HE from areas of low progression has increased since the inception of the WP agenda, yet the decrease in adults entering HE has continued. MillionPlus (2018) observe that mature students are such a heterogeneous group that by increasing their numbers, the student body will diversify and ‘be properly representative of the society that exists outside of campus’ (p. 30). Butcher (2020) adds that initiatives directed at adults need to be representative in approach, as many will have specific interest in understanding the benefits of embarking on education and how it can work for them practically. This means mature students should be able to find representative information, including

communications and imagery from peers with shared or relatable life experiences. IAG needs to include practical information on timetables, support, transport, and funding to truly speak to the wide audience universities attract, especially for adults weighing up their options; this should include specific marketing as well as representation holistically on university websites and at recruitment events, such as open and offer-holder days involving university visits (Bhattacharya et al., 2020).

There have been more recent updates in policy and rhetoric relating to mature students and lifelong learning. In 2018, a new public body in England, UK, called OfS was introduced to amalgamate the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). This collocation of regulatory bodies was intended to give a simplified process to even the playing field for providers as well as enable the regulation of WP agendas and the monitoring of access plans. This change in regulation brought a change to the annual access plans HE providers submitted, switching from a yearly submission to a 5-year planning cycle known as an 'Access and Participation Plan' (APP) (DBIS, 2016). Universities were advised of new APP protocols, which aimed to support groups underrepresented in HE within their own regional context (as before), but also to consider the students' educational lifecycle (Thomas, 2017). This change meant that a focus was introduced to provide a more integrated approach to provision offered at access, continuation, attainment, and progression stages of a student's time in education. The first APPs were approved in 2018, with specific topic briefings highlighting areas of concern on more of a national level, describing the types of focus the OfS wanted HE providers to display in APPs. Mature students were noted as being one group of interest, with the OfS urging universities to be bold in their approach to tackling declining numbers and closing retention gaps between older and younger students leaving HE. This was when the University of East Anglia (UEA) established a dedicated role committed to supporting mature students longitudinally. The priorities noted within UEA's APP aimed to increase mature student numbers by working in partnership with local Access to HE providers and support continuation for those who choose UEA. The local college Outreach partnerships included a specific programme including a contextual offer for students who chose to study at UEA and was offered to three regional colleges delivering Access to HE programmes (referred to as partner colleges). However, a later update from the OfS highlighted that only a handful of HE providers had made specific reference to mature students in their APP (OfS, 2021), with many choosing to continue using a broader approach to Outreach and WP initiatives (Thomas, 2017). The 2025 academic year in England brings a new APP period which includes institutional risk assessment against a new OfS tool, the Equality of Risk Register (EORR), a new framework provided in 2023 to support targeting and interventions aimed at specific groups (OfS, 2023). Alongside the introduction to the EORR, the

Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) will be implemented from 2026 with aims to centralise all HE funding into one system that individuals can use flexibly throughout their working lives (Standen, 2023). The LLE is a response to the Augar review into post-18 funding and education (Department of Education, 2019), which deemed that too few people were leaving HE with the technical skills needed to succeed in work, leaving skills and economic gaps that needed to be bridged while providing better social mobility. The LLE essentially aims to put more technical education back on the agenda, introducing flexible funding and modular provision that adults can utilise when it best suits (Standen, 2023).

Through noting both the historical and future landscape of mature student support through Outreach and WP, this chapter provides further details of interventions and strategies performed to help reduce the decline of adults in HE in the UK. This chapter provides insight into embedding a holistic strategy in mature student support to aid future APP implementation through experience using Possible Selves as a theoretical framework. Possible Selves considers temporality, self-regulation, agency, and motivation, and is a popular tool in HE studies (Harrison, 2018). Established by Markus and Nurius (1986), the concept of Possible Selves helps to explore phenomena relating to what individuals perceive as a possibility for themselves. Possible Selves is defined as:

How individuals think about their potential and about their future. Possible Selves are the ideal selves that we would very much like to become. They are the selves we could become, and the selves we are afraid of becoming.

(Markus and Nurius, 1986, p.954)

Possible Selves is a flexible theory that has been applied to several HE related studies (Henderson et al., 2019), including accessing HE (Stevenson, 2012; Murphy, 2019; Harrison, 2018), HE attainment (Leondari, 2007; Clegg and Stevenson, 2009; Stevenson, 2012), and self-regulation (Oyserman et al., 2004; Frazier et al., 2021). As Erikson (2019) elucidates, Possible Selves can explicate ‘individual, idiosyncratic meaning given to the student’s goals’ (p.14). Henderson et al. (2019) reason that Possible Selves is fundamental in HE studies as it helps to explain how temporality and the self can affect student behaviours in placing Possible Selves in an HE context. Henderson et al. (2019) state ‘one of the key reasons for using the Possible Selves concept in HE research, is that it is already there’ (p. 2).

Henderson et al. (2019) posits that ‘temporality and education are intertwined in a way that is more than simply organisational. Instead, the very purpose of education is understood temporally, as a progression from past to future’ (p. 28). Within this understanding of temporality are discourses, such as how students use time in the present to determine future success in terms of their hoped or feared-for versions of self (Henderson, 2019). However, as

Markus and Nurius (1986) note, the concept also captures any personal discourse in relation to lived experience and mindset, providing an example of an assistant professor who fears not achieving tenure. In this example, Markus and Nurius (1986) state ‘the fear is personalised, and the professor is likely to have a well-elaborated possible self that represents this fear’ (p. 954). For the purposes of this chapter, Possible Selves will be described in the context of exploring individuals’ negative precursors of the theory (i.e., like-to-avoid, feared-for selves), the more neutral (ought-to), as well as the positive (like-to-be, desired-for selves).

The next subsections amalgamate Possible Selves alongside interventions that provide IAG, support, and insight to mature students across the student lifecycle. This includes information at Access level, supporting Access to HE learners, partner colleges and adults outside of compulsory education and within the community. This straddles the transition into HE and supports continuation and good outcomes. The infographic illustrated in Figure 16.1 provides a flavour of the interventions delivered as part of the mature student programme. This aims to help individuals gather information, make informed decisions, and build on self-knowledge to actualise positively perceived Possible Selves at each stage of the educational lifecycle. Through the following subsections, readers will be provided with further context into interventions and how these feed into the overall strategy.

Outreach: Pre-Entry Support for Mature Students

Mature students form a diverse and heterogeneous group, presenting unique challenges in meeting their wide range of needs (MillionPlus, 2018). The breadth of knowledge required to support individuals initially appeared substantial, particularly in terms of gaining access to mature students. The Access to HE diploma is a valuable tool for those who may need to revisit education prior to progressing into HE level studies, offering the equivalent weighting of approximately three A-levels and embedding vital study techniques to help adult learners advance careers or retrain. The diplomas are available for those outside compulsory education from the age of 19 and makes a viable proxy measure for accessing mature students through FECs. Furthermore, universities have a civic responsibility to support regional communities through Outreach, which should also include provision for adults (Butcher, 2017). It is important to offer easily accessible information tailored to a mature audience (Butcher, 2020), providing specific IAG that Bhattacharya et al. (2020) argue is fundamental for successful lifelong learning educational policy.

As an individual with lived experience, the author was motivated to investigate factors driving adults to education and the types of opportunities that attract them in today's HE environment. Having attended university as a mature student and meeting several of the common characteristics

Activities: Interventions across the lifecycle

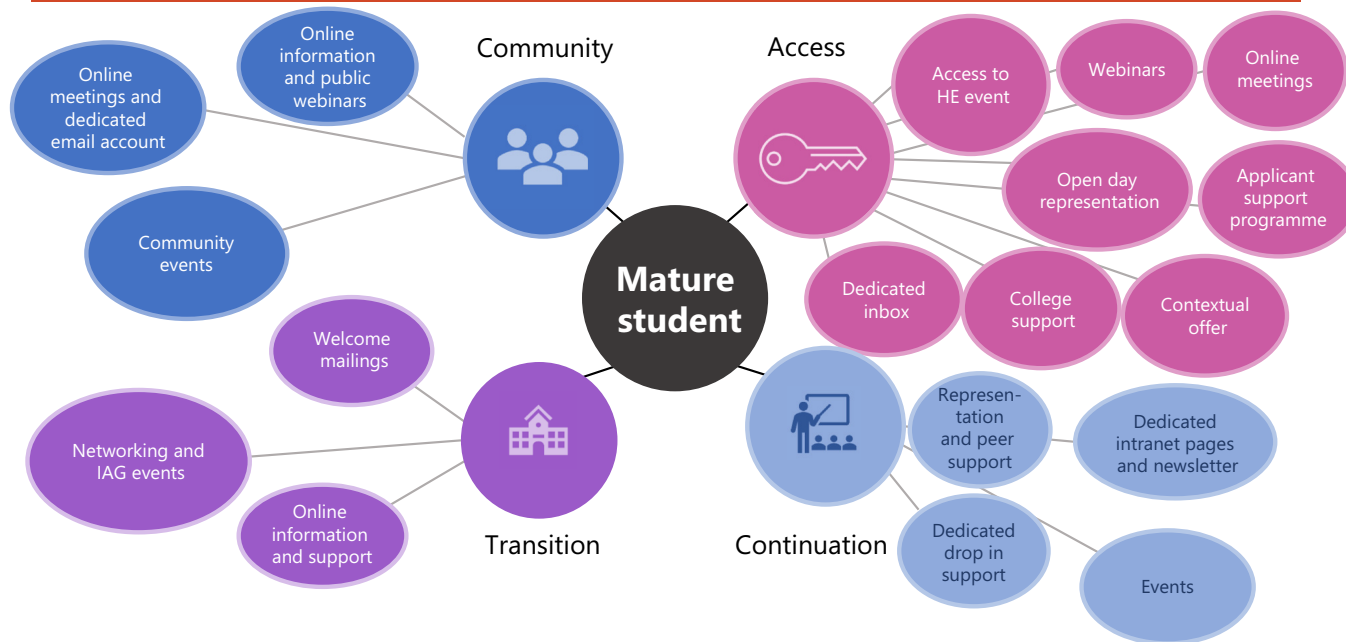


FIGURE 16.1 Interventions available throughout the student lifecycle at the University of East Anglia 2024.

(commuting, and balancing caregiving responsibilities), the overall experience was positive, with the odd moment of feeling isolated. While the age difference with other students was not a major concern, being frequently unable to participate in evening study sessions and extracurricular activities because of existing responsibilities was challenging. Nevertheless, the degree was completed, and experiences have been utilised to relate to, and address, common concerns raised by other adult learners. Literature consulted on mature student experience focussed on the kinds of successes and challenges encountered and supported with identifying areas where interventions to meet UEA's APP targets could address common questions at access level. Firstly, collaborative partnerships with FECs (partner colleges) offering the Access to HE diploma were formed, providing tailored support through IAG sessions relating to university applications and student finance. Concurrently, an internal knowledge base was created to capture frequently asked questions via a dedicated support inbox, enabling the university to provide personalised assistance to prospective mature students. This insight established mature students wanted to know about:

- What support is available within universities to assist with returning to education and balancing caregiving or work responsibilities. The type of support provision for students with disabilities or supporting others who have disabilities (including mental health and neurodivergence).
- How finance mechanisms apply in an individualised context, including how to apply for scholarships and explore any associated grants or bursaries. This extends to covering childcare, travel, and/or accommodation costs.
- Time commitments, preferably including timetable information so individuals can review how they would balance their time in relation to study and other responsibilities.
- Understanding entry requirements and how prior educational or work experience can contribute towards entry.

Addressing these key areas of information was intrinsic in UEA's mature student Outreach strategy. As illustrated in Figure 16.1, community-level (which includes those currently outside of education) interventions began with providing digital information, including access to a dedicated inbox and webpages that offered a 'frequently asked questions' approach to improve reach. Through acquired knowledge, an understanding of the main enablers and motivations was established. Erikson (2019) states 'motivation is about mechanisms behind the mere activation of an individual' (p.13), adding that the direction of the behaviour once activated affects persistence and ability to strive for achievement. Stevenson (2019) goes on to say that Possible Selves play a powerful role in motivating and regulating behaviour because 'they are perceived to contain the strategies needed to attain goals through self-schema which enable the

effective processing of information, procedural knowledge, skills, and strategies required to achieve a desired future-oriented state' (p.132). Mature students were reporting feeling confused by entry requirements, the application cycle and funding, and that little guidance existed to help find practical information to support their decision-making. This is reflective of what Reay et al. (2002) describes as an impact following the increased marketisation of HE. Participants do not always meet the entry needs of HE providers (Reay et al., 2002; Barclay, 2018), which can reinforce the idea that university is not a place mature students belong (Twigg-Flesner, 2018). The programme expanded to include webinars to deliver key information publicly and signpost to the online information and virtual one-to-one meetings that could be booked in by individuals as required, all of which have increased in popularity since the programme commenced in 2019. Figure 16.2 outlines the increase in uptake in programme activities since 2019, showing the programme's popularity has grown. Uptake in programme support was initially slow but has increased to over two-thirds of Access to HE students involved in at least one activity pre-entry.

The information available online is coupled with a physical presence at community events (such as science festivals and local recruitment events) as well as open days. UEA also joined LifePilot, an online IAG tool for adults looking for training opportunities in 2023, which offers an integrated approach to embedding the Outreach programme through partner FECs and community education and training providers. Furthermore, LifePilot provides a general level of IAG that speaks to all levels of education from a non-recruitment angle, including those with little to no prior education. Bhattacharya et al. (2020) highlights that these kinds of intervention are valuable as previous educational experience or distrust in educational programmes can hinder policy

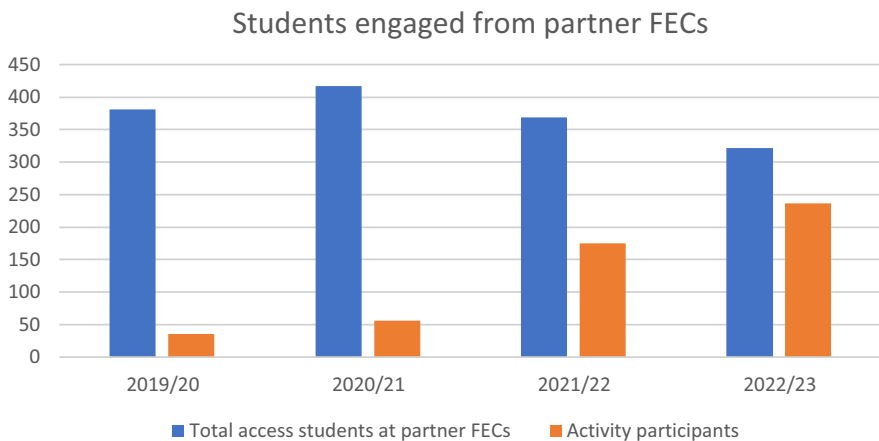


FIGURE 16.2 Number of students enrolled in partner colleges compared to number of students participating in Outreach activities, University of East Anglia.

objectives. However, this approach aims to support individuals back into work and create opportunities for anyone seeking them.

A useful source of insight into mature student behaviours at pre-entry level was contributed by Osborne et al. (2004), who established six categories of mature applicants through considering agency in decision-making in HE. These categories include delayed traditional students, those who may have entered work instead of HE and then changed their mind; late starters are described as those who have undergone a lifechanging event (such as redundancy or divorce); single parents are often striving to provide better lives for their offspring and see HE as a means to access this; careerists are those wishing to upskill in current careers; escapees are those looking for a way out of dead-end employment; and personal growers are those pursuing education for its own sake (Osborne et al., 2004). The FEC partnership delivers representative IAG, and sessions are booked in directly with providers. Learners are invited to attend an annual on-campus event providing an impartial insight into university, including an academic taster session and overview of support that universities provide to students. The information provided supports students who would meet one or more of the characteristics broadly described by Osborne et al. (2004). The annual event is well attended with over a hundred participants per annum since its inception with many participants returning to attend open days or engage with other aspects of the Outreach programme. Recently, an applicant support programme has been included, offered to those choosing UEA as one of their application options. The applicant support programme provides one-to-one guidance and signposting throughout the application cycle, highlighting key points to book in meetings, discuss finance, and answer individual questions as they arise. This specific programme provides an opportunity to get to know individuals directly, to enable learning about what drives motivations, hopes, and the hoped-for self. This describes a type of ‘road-mapping,’ which is something Oyserman et al. (2004) advocate as it provides a plan of steps to ensure motivations lead to actions. ‘Road mapping’ uses Possible Selves as a self-regulator, which motivates an individual to have self-efficacy in their agency (Oyserman et al., 2004; Frazier et al., 2021). It could be suggested that by linking up IAG and pre-entry strategies as part of an integrated approach, HE providers could support the continued motivations of students to succeed in their own goals. However, as Erikson (2019) indicates, motivation is a complex concept and ‘cannot be handled as a whole’ (p.13). The applicant support programme explores students’ own reflections on their temporality and education (Henderson, 2019), which Markus and Nurius (1986) state ‘allows us to make more direct connection between motives and specific actions’ (p.961). Clegg and Stevenson (2009) posit ‘Possible Selves play both a cognitive and an affective role in motivation, influencing expectations by facilitating a belief that some selves are possible whereas others are not and providing a clear goal to work towards, or to avoid’ (p. 233). The applicant support programme provides the opportunity to embed

information, signposting, and challenge negative perspectives of self where necessary through the use of representation both in person and online (Butcher, 2017). A resource bank is provided, consisting of information online including examples from current mature students discussing their experiences, managing studies alongside life, information about transport for commuters, and how to find suitable childcare. There is information available on finding specific pathways if further study is required prior to applying for university, which includes level 2 (GCSE and equivalent) and level 3 (A-level). Participants of the applicant support programme who progress into UEA degrees are invited to specific transition support, which will be discussed further in the following section.

WP: Continuation – Supporting Current Students to Transition into HE and Adjust to Student Life

As discussed earlier, there have been numerous challenges over the past two decades in attracting mature students into HE. This challenge extends over the transition period, where a student enrolls within a HE environment over to the continuation stage, which focusses on supporting the ongoing retention of those enrolled. Current mature students provide valuable insight into their experience through a continued programme of support that considers the issues discussed in the previous section. As Hillman (2021, 2024) outlines in his articles focussed on retention, political and societal pressures do not simply dissipate once a student begins HE level study. Many people have to work alongside studies to manage the ongoing cost of living crisis, whereby mature and commuter students are noted as groups most affected (MillionPlus, 2022). Furthermore, an area of concern is emphasised as a risk for mature students within the EORR so clear signposting for internal intranet pages and communications were established, as highlighted in Figure 16.1. The key differences in the shift in IAG for mature students at this level is:

- Funding available in case of emergency, or to support the costs of travel and/or childcare.
- How to connect with other mature students, students with caregiving responsibilities and other commuters.
- Finding suitable accommodation, either on or off campus. This could be for individuals, couples, or families.
- Navigating caregiving or work responsibilities and the pressures of study, including how to navigate services and university policy, alongside any challenges encountered.
- How to improve study technique and strategise studies to balance other life commitments.
- Empowering individuals to engage with wellbeing strategies and workshops to challenge imposter syndrome and actualise an individual's sense of belonging.

Throughout the transition phase of the student journey into HE, mature students were signposted to specific welcome events and activities that provided networking and IAG opportunities. This includes specific, hard-copy mailings to the home addresses of mature and commuter students (defined at UEA as students living in the same postcode, off-campus, throughout the year). However, as Tett et al. (2017) concede, transitions can occur at various stages of a student's journey, so the programme extends to all years and levels of study to ensure students establish a sense of belonging. McKendry et al. (2014) state that strategies to nurture sense of belonging should commence before a student embarks on a degree, finding that this supports expectation management and graduate success across a students' educational lifecycle.

Ahn and Davis (2020) note that concepts relating to sense of belonging has become increasingly popular over the past decade, adding 'many researchers have found that engagement is associated with students' sense of belonging, success and retention' (p. 622). It was paramount that a central support network of peers was established alongside the institutional support mechanisms, so those who were struggling to establish a sense of belonging could find others with shared life experiences. Working with student volunteers, a peer support group run by current students was established, many of whom have become student ambassadors to continue representing their peers across the educational lifecycle in paid roles. Alongside the peer support group, who organise student-led events and socials, a specific social media network and group chat exist to help students stay connected around their studies and busy lives.

Continued representation was available to provide students the opportunity to book in meetings to discuss engaging with internal services to support student persistence in relation to barriers encountered. This provides an opportunity to continue gaining insight into an individual's concept of their Possible Selves and how people chose to engage with the solutions available. As Clegg and Stevenson (2009) highlight, students with strong motivations and career aspirations tend to have a clearer trajectory to their like-to-be self than students who describe negative experiences that have affected motivation. This insight provides an opportunity to feedback to the university on these challenges to offer targeted interventions. This extends to delivering academic level IAG across schools of study to share signposting information to support teaching staff.

The WP level strategy includes institution-lead networking events and study drop-in sessions. The networking events include a commuter's breakfast as well as a networking lunch, held regularly throughout term-times and advertised broadly to reach as many people as possible. Flexibility in when and how these events are delivered is a key consideration, as mature students are typically lacking in available time; providing options to stop by and come back and chat more formally if required is offered through the wider

programme. There is a regular newsletter, shared via email and the social media platform, to help with connecting together the vast array of information and services available. Drop-in study sessions are facilitated by a learning enhancement team and are available to all students, in line with the whole university approach adopted (Thomas, 2017) but are marketed heavily towards mature and commuter students to ensure they are aware of the opportunity to attend a relaxed intervention to embed individual strategy and peer-support. Thomas (2012) states that through these types of intervention, ‘social engagement can be seen to create a sense of belonging and offer informal support through interaction with friends and peers’ (p.15). The activities in place for current students has strengthened the engagement of the group overall since the programme commenced. The feedback highlights that for mature students who rely on institutional support interventions, representation and recognition of experience is gratefully received. Hundreds of students engage with the support available each year, which is a positive sign the programme is impactful; however, further research is required to explore mature students capacity for engagement overall.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the types of interventions forming a longitudinal programme to support mature students to access HE and continue to progress once there. By applying the Possible Selves framework and examining the diverse experiences of mature students, this chapter highlights the critical importance of individual context in effective ‘road-mapping’ strategies (Oyserman et al., 2004). By working collaboratively with internal and external stakeholders (i.e., FECs, student services and academic schools/faculties of study), details of the interventions available are accessible from multiple levels so can be cross-promoted, as necessary.

Establishing a sense of belonging is valuable across the educational lifecycle (McKendry et al., 2014) but can sometimes take a little while for mature students to establish depending on their situation and personal beliefs (Harrison, 2018). Therefore, a suggested approach, in addition to providing representative IAG, would be to establish a foundational knowledge base of individuals who require further support. Recommendations can then be tailored to help people remain motivated to achieve their hoped or desired-for goals.

Notes

- 1 Mature students are defined as being over 21 when they begin studying in HE in the UK, aligning to the Office for Students Definition (OfS, 2020).
- 2 Polar quintiles are used by the OfS to explore participation with HE based on post-code region (OfS, 2024).

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17

REPRESENTATIONAL REALITIES

Understanding the 21+ Performing Arts Student Journey in England

Mark Hunter and Javeria Khadija Shah

Introduction

This chapter is based on our extensive experience in further and higher arts education in England, UK, and is particularly relevant to educators, researchers, and policymakers in the performing arts. It focuses on the outcomes of mature students aged 21 and above, who often pursue higher education through various paths, such as returning to academic pursuits later in life or transitioning from industry without formal educational experience. The chapter's main objective is to use quantitative data to address questions about transitions and outcomes for mature students in the small specialist performing arts (or 'conservatoire') landscape institutions focused on intensive training in the performing arts, such as music, drama, and dance. The focus on English providers is driven by the context of the devolved nations—the Office for Students' (OfS) purview is England only. Our analysis is based on proxy data from the OfS Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) dashboard, providing valuable insights and commentary on the trajectories and outcomes for mature students. In addition, consideration is given to the specific contexts and differences that impact this demographic, applying a split-metric analysis—examining data by dividing it into distinct subgroups—to shed light on how intersectional contexts influence student journeys. The chapter diverts slightly from the abstract's aim of utilising qualitative data to ascertain the lived experiences and trajectories of mature students from within the OfS dataset, as this data was not forthcoming from the institutions we analysed. However, using socio-cultural theories to interpret the data's patterning yielded sufficient insights to propose practical actions for the sector. The chapter examines access, inclusion, support, and recognition within conservatoires and the industries where graduates

pursue their careers. It will be of interest to anyone interested in the landscape of performing arts education, providing insights that can shape policy and practice. The research addresses important questions about the experiences and outcomes of mature students in the performing arts.

The chapter explores a number of interconnected factors and how they might impact the outcomes of mature (21+) entrants to English performing arts, particularly in conservatoire-type settings. This involves an analysis of the accessibility, inclusivity, support, and recognition dynamics in the conservatoires where mature students are enrolled, and the fields where these graduates are employed. Additionally, the research investigates the importance given to the life experiences of older students entering performing arts education in relation to admission policies and practices, particularly in an industry that traditionally prioritises youthful talent over experience. The chapter starts with a short overview of the main conversations about adult learners in the UK's higher education sector. It also looks at recent literature that discusses issues of accessibility and inclusivity in this area. Then, we explain the research methodology that forms the basis of our exploration. We then present the research findings, analyse what these findings tell us, and conclude the study with some recommendations.

Situating the Mature Student

After compulsory schooling, England's education system is diverse and includes further and higher education sectors (Shah, 2022). Full-time education is mandatory until the age of 18. After reaching the age of 19, education is usually not publicly funded, except for specific exemptions, such as for students from disadvantaged groups—those from low-income households, under-represented ethnic backgrounds, or with disabilities—as part of efforts to increase participation. Individuals over 21 years old in the UK are considered 'mature' students (DfE, 2019). They are often categorised as non-traditional because they do not meet undergraduate entry requirements or come from non-traditional routes (Black, 2023).

The prevalent discourse in the UK regarding mature students primarily focuses on inclusion (see Black, 2023; Madriaga, 2023). In a literature review about mature students, Black (2023) concluded that factors such as social stratification, issues with social mobility, and non-traditional routes into higher education for first-in-family students contribute to determining the quality of experiences and trajectories of mature students. These factors can lead to challenges like dropping out of education while also shaping the circumstances under which some learners might return to study later in life. Bean and Metzner's model (1985), cited by Black (2023), highlights a range of variables influencing student attrition, particularly among mature students, including academic, social, and environmental factors.

Building on these findings, academic success and persistence are influenced by several interrelated factors. Academic experiences, such as prior academic performance, current performance, and the ability to integrate into academic life, shape students' engagement. Personal and social aspects also play a role, including individual goals, the perceived value of education, feelings of isolation, relationships with faculty, and social interactions. External circumstances, such as financial stability, opportunities to transfer, and the influence of external friendships, further create a broader context for the academic journey. Together, these elements interact with internal dynamics like grades, institutional compatibility, and commitment, ultimately determining the likelihood of persistence or withdrawal.

Various factors, including academic, social, psychological, and environmental influences, are believed to contribute not only to the likelihood of students dropping out of university but also to the socialisation and selection processes involved in universities admitting students. These factors will inevitably vary based on individual circumstances.

When considering mature students, it can be argued that they will likely experience a combination of the variables outlined in Bean and Metzner's attrition model (1985). For example, mature students often face challenges with academic integration, feelings of alienation, social life, finances, college grades, and fitting into the university environment.

Adjusting to university culture can be particularly difficult for mature students, especially when managing their finances. This age group often faces financial challenges, which may be compounded by additional responsibilities such as single parenting or socio-economic disadvantages from an intersectional perspective. These factors can contribute to feelings of alienation, potentially affecting their academic performance and overall course outcomes.

Mature students face various challenges during their time at university, and this study aimed to explore what the data might reveal about their experiences in conservatoires. The research was approached with an open mind regarding potential findings. Although the researchers had extensive experience in the post-compulsory UK education sector, it was acknowledged that their insights, while valuable, may not necessarily reflect the experiences of the broader population.

Theorising the Challenges

Expanding the discussion to explore the reasons why mature students may face challenges or be categorised as 'non-traditional,' a cultural theory approach is employed to build upon Bean and Metzner's framework. This approach aims to provide insights into the socio-cultural dynamics that may influence these challenges.

Cultural models that recognise social systems and structures, such as education, law enforcement, and the media, reflect and uphold dominant ideologies. This suggests that we are all expected to adhere to a set of social beliefs that determine what is deemed acceptable and unacceptable in society. This influence is evident across all facets of our lives (Bates and Press, 2010). According to these criteria, it is crucial to consider how effectively adult students integrate into established systems financially, socially, and academically when evaluating their success. This group of students is often at a disadvantage as they do not fit into the socially constructed norms of academic paths, experiences, and outcomes. The same is true for other marginalised groups based on factors such as race and class. Therefore, there is an increasing focus on including these groups in widening participation and expanding inclusive practices of institutions.

A longitudinal study conducted by Shah (2022) examined how the rhetoric and practice of 14–19 educational policy impacted the experiences of GCSE-failed or ‘non-traditional’ learners in further education. After 10 years, the study concluded that the state-sanctioned curriculum system was designed to categorise and pathologise learners, as reflected in data showing consistent tracking of students into rigid educational pathways based on prior academic performance and perceived abilities. This systemic practice disproportionately affected non-traditional learners, such as mature students, who were often represented in the data as struggling with integration and success, reinforcing negative perceptions of their academic capabilities. When examining this factor through the framework of Hall’s concepts on representation, one can argue that rather than perceiving identity as a definitive historical reality, it should be understood as an ongoing ‘production’ that is constantly evolving and not static. As Hall (1997, p. 5) states, ‘Representation is the way in which meaning is given to the things depicted,’ emphasising that identity is shaped by the interplay of context, encompassing opinions, events, environments, and various other factors. This points to the idea that identity is not a fixed entity but rather a fluid construct that is continuously influenced by its surroundings. In this context, the experience of mature students can be understood as shaped by factors such as their exclusion from mainstream curricula or further education reforms, changes to university funding models, and the representation of university students as typically between 18 and 21.

In summary, mature students are often viewed as being on the periphery of mainstream education. As non-traditional learners, they do not conform to the dominant ideologies of what a student at each stage should be. They challenge the status quo and preferred representations of mainstream student demographics, and as a result, they are grouped with other marginalised groups.

The Conservatoire Context

The history of the conservatoire is tightly bound up with (and in service to) the traditional professions of the performing arts, namely live ensemble performance. Whether acting, dancing, instrumental or song performance, the conservatoires sought to provide training (importantly, this term is still preferred in this part of the sector over ‘education’) for aspiring performers, and this is bound up with the contemporary focus in HE on ‘skills’ and to some extent vocational training. One challenge for the conservatoires over other vocational trainers, is that the ecology of the performing arts is different from that of ‘the professions’ in that there are fewer jobs to be had and therefore posts to be filled. Thus, the conservatoires have recruited, selected and trained ‘only the best.’ This extrinsic driver (limited opportunities) has become an intrinsic driver (choose only those likely to achieve a significant public career). Applicant demand outstrips supply of places at conservatoires, thus creating the conditions for highly selective recruitment.

What Does This Mean for Mature Learners?

The Equality Act (2010) includes age as a ‘protected characteristic,’ meaning that by law there is no differentiation nor discrimination based on age of entry to higher education (nor any other context). The OfS as sector regulator in England still captures and reports applicant entry age against the heading of ‘mature learners,’ and further sub-divides this into those aged 21–30 and those aged 31 and above. Given the intimate relationship between conservatoires and the arts sector for which they are training performers, this presents some challenges to deep-seated cultural expectations and values regarding ‘youth’ and prodigy.

Dance and Music training are the most marked areas of the performing arts where youthfulness and excellence are intertwined. For dance, this is often framed as relating the physical demands of the discipline, and the capacity of an ageing body, to fulfil these. In classical and jazz music there are strong cultural mores that valorise prodigy and instrumental virtuosity, while the cultural history of popular music is deeply intertwined with youth. Acting diverts to some extent from these expectations, with regard for the emotional maturity required to inhabit and perform roles with complex psychologies and contexts, and also classical and contemporary canons which include leading character roles in middle and later age. However, there is still a strong cultural drive in the mainstream Global North—characterised by the West End and Broadway in the theatre, and Hollywood in Film and Television—which expect (or even demand) youth as an intrinsic characteristic of new performers entering the profession. All of these contexts and socio-cultural expectations mean that certain groups (identifiable as those with protected characteristics) are sometimes

less likely to be ‘attractive’ to the training provider, who in turn is ‘supplying the talent’ to the performing arts industries which derive value from youthfulness.

A Broadening Curriculum

The advent of the 1992 Higher Education Act—which is mostly referenced in relation to the watershed moment when polytechnics in the UK could apply for University title—had different and particular impacts for the conservatoire sector, namely that those studying on practically focused ‘vocational’ Performing Arts training programmes were now eligible for receipt of both tuition fee and maintenance grants (later to be downgraded to loans under successive Labour and Conservative governments, in part to deal with the fiscal impact of the liberalisation or ‘massification’ of the HE sector in terms of numbers of students enrolled on courses). The response from the conservatoire sector was to begin to broaden or liberalise its curricula to include subjects allied and adjacent to ‘pure’ performance training. These curricula included two main areas of focus, that of contextual training: arts in health and therapeutic, community and applied settings, and technical training: the ‘backstage’ skills of production and management of performance, including craft skills such as costume, props and set design and manufacture. Both of these distinct areas of curricula were not freighted with the social-cultural and industry expectations of youth (indeed they might be considered a counter to this whereby maturation/experience might be considered indicators of expertise).

In reporting on these changing dynamics in the conservatoire curricula, it is not the intention of this chapter to reinforce a binary opposition whereby the valorisation of youth is maintained in the ‘core’ disciplines of performance (i.e., what an audience is ‘willing to accept’ on stage and screen), while additional ‘out of sight’ discipline areas are introduced to enable other learners, not young or beautiful enough to be put in front of an audience, to pursue meaningful careers in the performing arts. It is, however, useful to understand the full range and extent of the conservatoire offer and consider how this affects applicant and enrolled student demographics.

Research Methodology

This study was initially planned in two phases. The first phase employed quantitative methods to evaluate data from the OfS TEF dashboard related to mature students. The second phase aimed to gather contextual information about mature students from drama schools within the dataset using qualitative methods. However, the lack of responses to the questionnaire prevented progression to the second phase. Consequently, the study shifted its focus to a purely quantitative approach. This type of research relies on an objective

analysis of data, emphasising numeric and unchanging data alongside detailed, convergent reasoning rather than divergent reasoning. A descriptive quantitative research design was adopted to analyse findings from phase one. Unlike experimental studies designed to establish *causality*, a descriptive study identifies associations between variables.

Research Approach and Findings

This section examines the data provided by the OfS and TEF dashboards, which offer proxy information about undergraduate students studying at English higher education institutions under the ‘Registered (fee cap)’ classification with the OfS. The dataset spans a 4-year period. The data is divided into two categories: student experience and student outcomes. Students’ experiences and outcomes are assessed based on five main sets of UK National Student Survey (NSS) questions, focusing on the following themes:

- Quality of teaching on my course
- Assessment and feedback
- Academic support
- Learning resources
- Student voice

The data is derived from the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and provides information on:

- 1 Continuation (i.e., those students who progressed from level 4 to level 5) for years one to two of their undergraduate programme)
- 2 Completion (i.e., the number of those remaining students who successfully complete the target award)
- 3 Progression (i.e., those students who have responded to the Graduate Outcomes Survey 15 months after graduation)

The student outcomes data covers a slightly different time period compared to the student experience data. The continuation data spans the same 4 years as the student experience data, while the completion data measures years two, three, and four (with year four being the most recent). The progression data covers years one, two, and three, with year four data not yet available, as it is collected 15 months after graduation. The data from these 3- and 4-year periods has been averaged to produce an overall indicator for student experience and student outcomes.

The OfS categorises mature students into two age groups: those aged 21–30 and those aged 31 and above. The analysis considers each dataset individually and then combines them. Although further analysis across intersections with

other segmented metrics would be beneficial, such as examining mature student data in relation to disability, socio-economic background, participation in higher education (Indices of Multiple Deprivation, IMD, and Tracking Under-Representation by Area, TUNDRA), gender, ethnicity, and UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) tariff, this was not possible. In this analysis, each provider's data is compared to an OfS benchmark, which is determined based on the provider's historical performance and that of their peer group. The OfS dashboard presents numerical data (in CSV files) and visualisations to show how providers' performance aligns with benchmarks for student experience and outcomes. Performance is categorised as materially below benchmark, broadly in line with benchmark, or materially above benchmark. Additionally, the percentage contribution of each provider to their own benchmark and the statistical confidence of that distribution is displayed, with strong certainty defined as $\leq 85\%$ statistical confidence.

It is important to note that the analysis does not directly compare the absolute performance of mature students to their conservatoire peer group, but rather to their peers under the age of 21 within the same institution. For example, if students aged 21–30 perform three percentage points above their benchmark, it does not necessarily indicate a better experience than peers at another provider performing two percentage points above their benchmark, as the benchmarks differ. However, this data enables a comparison of mature students with their younger peers within a provider along the X-axis and provides an indicator of overall sector performance for mature students in English conservatoires along the Y-axis.

The providers discussed in this chapter are all located in England. While providers across the entire United Kingdom would typically be considered, the OfS, the regulatory body for higher education in England, does not have oversight over providers in Scotland, Wales, or Northern Ireland. This regulatory limitation influenced the scope of this research.

Of the fifteen providers included in this study, thirteen are based in London. Among these, the Academy of Contemporary Music (ACM) operates campuses in both London and Guildford. Outside London, only Leeds Conservatoire and the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts (LIPA) represent other regions in England, illustrating the geographical concentration of conservatoires within the capital.

The term 'conservatoire' is used to refer to a self-selecting group of small and specialist performing arts providers and are typically members of one or more sector groups such as Conservatoires UK (<https://www.conservatoiresuk.ac.uk>), the Federation of Drama Schools (<https://federationofdramaschools.co.uk>), and GuildHE (<https://guildhe.ac.uk>). Dance education and training providers were excluded from this study due to the unique nature of their programmes, which are closely tied to the physical demands of a dancer's career.

Additionally, conservatoires that are part of larger universities, such as Royal Birmingham Conservatoire (BCU) (<https://www.bcu.ac.uk/conservatoire>) and Guildford School of Acting (University of Surrey) (<https://gsauk.org>), were not included as their performing arts data is not available separately. Institutions with university status or those operating as large multi-site and transnational organisations, such as BIMM University (<https://www.bimm.ac.uk>) and SAE Institute (<https://www.sae.edu>), were also excluded due to differences in organisation, management, and student experience.

The study focused on 15 providers registered with the OfS (<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk>), including ArtsEd (<https://artsed.co.uk>), ACM (<https://www.acm.ac.uk>), Guildhall School of Music and Drama (<https://www.gsmd.ac.uk>), ICMP (Institute of Contemporary Music Performance) (<https://icmp.ac.uk>), LAMDA (London Academy of Music & Dramatic Art) (<https://www.lamda.ac.uk>), Leeds Conservatoire (<https://www.leedsconservatoire.ac.uk>), LIPA (<https://www.lipa.ac.uk>), PointBlank (<https://www.pointblankmusicschool.com>), RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Art) (<https://www.rada.ac.uk>), Rose Bruford College (<https://www.bruford.ac.uk>), The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama (<https://www.cssd.ac.uk>), The Royal Academy of Music (<https://www.ram.ac.uk>), The Royal College of Music (<https://www.rcm.ac.uk>), The Royal Northern College of Music (<https://www.rncm.ac.uk>), and Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance (<https://www.trinitylaban.ac.uk>).

The dataset poses a significant challenge as there are very few mature students studying in the English conservatoire sector. This means that for several providers, the data is not reportable across various measures. There are three types of non-reported data: (1) ‘none,’ which means there are no students in that particular category at the provider; (2) ‘low,’ indicating that there are fewer than 23 respondents for a specific metric in the dataset; and (3) ‘DPH,’ indicating that the dataset is not large enough to prevent the disclosure of specific identifiable student details, and is therefore suppressed for data protection reasons.

Although the data cannot be fully interpreted, the high prevalence of missing data across many providers and measures indicates very low numbers of mature students enrolled in and graduating from English conservatoires.

Our initial observations of the data show that mature students report more positive than negative experiences compared to their peers aged under 21. The percentage of positive experiences across each of the five student indicators falls within the 60%–70% range. However, the student outcome (HESA) data reveals that continuation is a challenge for mature students in this sector, with a 46.7% variance. Completion data shows a much stronger positive variance of 71.4%, but progression data drops to a low 30% positive variance. This prompts us to question the relationship between England’s higher education conservatoire providers and the industries, job roles, and careers that mature students

might expect to progress into, given the positive completion indicator. The significant decline from a completion positivity score of 71.4% to an employment or further study positivity score of 30% raises questions about potential ageism in the performing arts and wider cultural industries.

It is worth noting from these initial observations that older students in both age groups (21–30, 31+) tend to have higher positive scores compared to their peers under 21 years old. When it comes to the student experience, the key factors are the student's relationship with the course and provider, as well as the provider's ability to offer a high-quality student experience for learners over 21 years old. When examining progression data (indicating successful graduate-level employment or further study), it is important to question the shared responsibilities of providers, students, and the industries they are entering in terms of preparing and supporting older learners for meaningful employment. With only 40% of mature students achieving the graduate employment threshold, according to the longitudinal Graduate Outcomes survey (<https://www.graduateoutcomes.ac.uk>) conducted 15 months after graduation, it is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of the educational experience and the willingness of the performing arts and broader cultural sectors to provide career opportunities for mature learners. There is enough variation among providers to warrant attention.

The project was originally planned in two phases. The second phase aimed to gather insights from discussions with providers about their approaches to preparing, engaging with, and supporting mature learners in a higher education sector predominantly focused on learners under the age of 21. This phase intended to begin with a questionnaire, followed by interviews with senior leaders in academic provision and student support services at these providers to collect qualitative data. Such data would have enhanced the analysis and addressed gaps in the OfS TEF dashboard data, where outcomes were suppressed due to low numbers or data protection. This approach would have provided a deeper understanding of the student experience underlying these numbers.

Based on existing literature and implications from the data, it can be inferred that in situations where there are very few mature students, there may be a lack of resources allocated specifically for these students. There may also be assumptions that mature students are more capable of handling the challenges of higher education, but they may still feel marginalised in an environment that primarily serves students under 21. It would be helpful to talk to educational institutions about their awareness of the extra challenges that mature students face, such as caregiving responsibilities, social commitments, and work, which younger students may not have. This was also mentioned in our earlier discussion of the attrition model.

Conclusion

While acknowledging the gaps, further contextual exploration of the findings is recommended by conducting a similar study to the initially planned phase 2. The research analysis can be broken down into the following themes:

- There is a low number of mature students in English conservatoires.
- Mature students largely report positive experiences.
- Attrition and positive completion are challenges.
- A lack of targeted resources is possible because of the low number of mature students.
- There is a potential for higher-than-normal expectations of mature students being able to handle pressure.
- There is a possibility of mature students feeling marginalised in environments primarily centred on supporting under 21s.

Recommendations

Consequently, these themes raise more questions and warrant further exploration, such as: are there persistent ‘hidden criteria’ for applicant selection that fall foul of the Equality Act (2010)? Are we providing adequate support to mature students that we are recruiting? How might we enhance the learning and destinations of mature students? Can English conservatoires do more in their recruitment of mature students? And is the arts industry doing enough to assist the creative pipeline for mature students? How can we enhance educational inclusion for mature students? How can we keep and support mature students through the best possible academic outcomes?

Recruitment practices must be aligned with the Equality Act (2010) and not utilise hidden criteria in selecting applicants for study/training. Current criteria should be reviewed and, if necessary, changed to ensure that applicants are selected (for all and any course) based on the potential for excellence exhibited, not the drivers of a conservative and youth-obsessed industry.

Are we providing adequate support to mature students that we are recruiting?

The student experience on programmes and across the institution needs to regard and reflect the diversity of its cohorts. This means both through the curricula and learning, teaching and assessment practices (pedagogy), and also through the learning logistics and environment. Timetables that acknowledge and reflect complex lives is one systemic tool for inclusion, but the lived experience on campus and in the classroom must make mature learners and learners across all intersections of protected and non-protected characteristics (thinking particularly of class and income) welcome, enabled, and supported.

Is the arts industry doing enough to assist the creative pipeline for mature students?

To improve the career opportunities for mature students, it is important to ensure that the industry is inclusive and representative. The conservatoire sector plays a crucial role in supplying talent to various industries, and it is essential for the higher education sector to recognise and influence the industries and employment sectors it prepares graduates for. Both the higher education sector as a whole and Conservatoires, in particular, can have a significant impact on challenging and changing the practices of the industries their graduates enter. The performing arts industry is complex, with a small number of big players controlling various vested interests. There are deep-seated problematic values and behaviours in the industry, including egregious practices such as the ‘casting couch’ tradition, which has been enabled and emboldened by individuals like Harvey Weinstein.

How can we enhance educational inclusion for mature students?

The post-Black Lives Matter calling out of exclusionary and explicitly racist attitudes, atmospheres and behaviours at a number of UK conservatoires, is a testament to the fact that this part of the HE sector has colluded and allowed such exclusionary practices to permeate what should be safe, supportive and developmental contexts. The data presented in this chapter regarding mature learners is partial and weak; this absence is in and of itself an indicator that there are simply not enough (opportunities for) mature learners in English Conservatoires. One might reflect that by withholding opportunities for mature learners in these settings, the conservatoires are perpetuating the conditions for exclusionary and abusive behaviours to persist; a cohort including a significant proportion of mature learners would likely, by its nature, resist the exploitative and abusive behaviour made possible by an asymmetry of power between (older) teacher and (younger) student.

How can we retain mature students and support them through the best possible academic outcomes?

It is important to create a welcoming and inclusive environment that treats mature learners as an integral part of the learner community, rather than as a marginalised group. The delivery of curricula should consider the complex lives that mature learners may have, as well as the potential challenges that all learners may face. It is not solely the responsibility of the student to adapt to the learning environment. Staff should avoid reinforcing long-held practices that prioritise continuation of activities over wellbeing. It is important to embrace external benchmarks and frameworks for healthy and inclusive professional practice, such as the ReSet Better Charter (2022), the Theatre Green Book (2021), and the Parents and Carers in Performing Arts (PIPA) Best Practice Charter (2018).

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18

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON WORK EXPERIENCE AND LIFE EXPERIENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF MATURE STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Lucy Ellis and Nazim Uddin

Introduction

Historically, academics have preferred pure or conceptually-based liberal knowledge over ‘practically useful applied or mechanical knowledge’ just as ‘the medieval university was forthrightly anti-utilitarian’ which embodied ‘a prejudice against all forms of practical knowledge’ or ‘pragmatic and useful knowledge, knowledge marshalled towards a worldly goal’ (Muller, 2009). However, the higher education (HE) environment has changed dramatically from this position. One indication of this is the advent, in the UK, of the ‘Civic University’ which recognises its fundamental links to employment, health, social wellbeing and the environmental fabric of the place in which it is situated (Civic University Network, 2024).

Since the 1980s, widening participation in HE has been a major economic driver (OECD, 2018; Shah and Whiteford, 2017). The mandate for new forms of relationship between HE and working life has been well documented and the main drivers are economic globalisation; labour market benefits of education; diversification of the HE system; graduateness for traditionally vocational occupations; regulatory developments; massification; research intensiveness and new professional requirements for HE (Billett, 2014; Jackson et al., 2022; Tynjälä et al., 2003; Tynjälä, 2008; Uddin, 2023).

While the traditional domains of vocational training within HE includes medicine, nursing, education and law (Elias, 1995), there are many more markets which have opened up. Learning societies require continuous education. Newer professions such as journalism, management, business studies, communication studies, sports science and tourism are described by Muller (2009) as ‘fourth generation’ professions. These are considered to have ‘weaker

professional identities, less clear foundational disciplines and greater proximity to the point of application' (Cooper and Harris, 2013). Along with this new and evolving landscape comes the challenge for HE scholars and practitioners to develop pedagogical and educational thinking and practices which reflect, rationalise and justify the coexistence of education and the workplace in HE and also societal change and changes in the HE landscape.

Outside the scope of this review, but all dealing with the interface between work and study, are lifelong learning, workplace learning, employability and professional development.

Approaches to Work-Based Learning in HE

Experience of work, 'work experience' and classroom learning are, by and large, thought of as dichotomous forms of experience, with classroom learning consisting mainly of the dissemination of abstract, context-independent knowledge structures. Learning through work and the pedagogic qualities of work settings have been extensively discussed and conceptualised in the literature. In vocationally based tertiary education, a key educational purpose is that students will learn from both education and workplace settings, each offering separate contributions to students' learning on a programme of study (Tynjälä et al., 2003). Abrahamsson points out that 'there is a relation between the content of work experience and its formal function in relation to higher education' (Abrahamsson, 1989). Much work in recent decades has been aimed at bringing these separate contributions to 'curriculum coherence' (Muller, 2022).

There is a broad consensus among scholars that coherence is crucial for programme design in HE (Becher, 2022, p. 577). A "coherent" curriculum is logically aligned...in a connected sequence' to the 'structural features of the discipline' (Muller, 2022) in a way that 'one dominant logic should determine how the various kinds of elements could be combined either via a conceptual logic or a contextual logic' (Muller, 2022). Pedagogical research has focussed on the integration of theory and practice in work-based learning while more theoretically based research has focussed more on accounting for the cognitive, psychological and socio-personal integration that takes place on the part of learners (Billett, 2008, 2009, 2013, 2014). Theories and frameworks have been developed from various disciplinary perspectives, namely, social psychology, social and behavioural sciences, the sociology of education, social anthropology, education and economics.

Some scholars distinguish procedural knowledge from conceptual knowledge (for a review see Braithwaite and Sprague, 2021). Procedural knowledge refers to the understanding needed to perform a specific task or activity, in addition to being able to utilise and apply this knowledge effectively to achieve an objective or solve a problem. Conceptual knowledge, however, is a multifaceted construct that includes knowledge of categories, relationships,

principles and representations. Gamble (2009)) argued that procedural knowledge could be principled or segmental, and that conceptually coherent curricula could contain both conceptual and procedural forms of knowledge. Similarly, Bernstein was explicit that procedural knowledge could be hierarchical in the sense of part of vertical discourse: the procedures are linked to other procedures hierarchically' (Bernstein, 2000, p. 160).

Billett (2014) argues for the existence of 'personal epistemologies' which shape the integration of academic and practice settings. This process:

[N]eeds to include the two kinds of social settings and their particular contributions, as well as the ways in which individuals engage in the process of meaning making and reconciliation. Central to this process of learning are their personal epistemologies, as shaped over time by their cognitive experiences, the domains of knowledge they have constructed and their intentionalities when engaging in activities and interactions and the subsequent responses to them.

(Billett, 2014, p. 10)

For Billett, the idea of personal epistemology is derived from psychology, sociology and philosophical accounts. They are positioned as 'active, intentional, derived in personally particular ways through the unique set of socially derived experiences that comprise individuals' life histories or ontogenies' (Billett, 2009).

Adaptability, or adaptable learning and transfer, are also central to catering for mature students with a widening access background in HE. These concepts are invoked in the literature as the transfer of knowledge across conceptual borders, between work and classroom and related to the development of student thinking in all levels of education (Billett, 2013; Lehmann, 2022; Lobato, 2006; Segers and Gegenfurtner, 2013; Wagner, 2006). Billett comments that students develop 'capacities to be adaptable in quite specific ways to diverse circumstances and activities that are often distinct from and unknown in the circumstances where learning is held to arise' (Billett, 2013).

The interest in transfer is 'not surprising as developing adaptable learning - knowledge applicable to circumstances beyond those where it is learnt - is central to the educational project and purpose of educational institutions' (Billett, 2014). Institutions may be reluctant to concede that much of their students' learning is unlikely to be applicable elsewhere. What is interesting to consider is how the concept of transfer might apply to the movement from uncharted work (life) experience of mature students prior to entering formal education, to the classroom environment. Do the concepts of transfer and adaptability map on to this many-to-one scenario as a contrast to the one-to-one scenario which takes place within formal education which contains a work experience element ('dual education')?

Much research deals with the ‘transfer problem’, indicating that there is not enough transfer between work and learning or that it is not of the appropriate quality or nature in HE settings. In the early days of this research field, the conditions of transfer were identified as including ‘both the generalization of learned material to the job and the maintenance of trained skills over a period of time on the job’ (Baldwin and Ford, 1988). Later work examined age-related differences in transfer (Gegenfurtner and Vauras, 2012) and the impact of motivation and curiosity on learning in the workplace and the significance for the design of training programmes (Gegenfurtner and Vauras, 2012). Confidence in prior knowledge is an important factor to consider in the acquisition of alternative ideas and new knowledge and has been investigated empirically (Cordova et al., 2014).

Research on the transfer of training has gained much attention over the past forty years and has grown in intensity as evinced by the coining of the term ‘transfer research’ more than ten years ago and the commissioning of a special issue on the topic in *Educational Research Review* (Segers and Gegenfurtner, 2013). It is an important area of study because of the fundamental challenge of creating partnerships between education and working life. Some describe these as different worlds and align them with formal and informal learning respectively, arguing that they are moving closer together (Tynjälä, 2008). However, work is ongoing to minimise the work/education dichotomy in HE where ‘the shadows of “boundary” remain’ (Muller, 2022).

Integration across knowledge domains has been debated extensively in the literature, most recently in the context of student teachers who are expected to integrate knowledge between the domains of content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (Lehmann, 2022). Lehmann found that ‘student teachers often fail to engage in knowledge integration and lapse into separative learning (SL). SL is defined by a rather narrowly focused mental processing, acquisition, and organization of what needs to be learned without making connections to other disciplines, knowledge domains, and topics’ (Lehmann, 2022, p.1190).

Theoretical Perspectives on the Place of Work in HE

Models and theories which describe the relationship between work and classroom learning include personal epistemologies, transfer, typification, integration, adaptability and boundary making and crossing (Billett, 2014). This review will focus on those most relevant to assist with identifying what happens when work (life) experience, which has been gained by mature individuals prior to entry to HE interfaces with classroom learning during the experience of HE.

There is a surprising lack of literature addressing the interface between work (life) experience gained prior to entry to HE and knowledge gained within HE. If 'life experience' is referred to at all within the widening participation literature, it is in its broadest sense. For example, Chapman and Whiteford (2017) discuss a programme to facilitate access to HE by Aboriginal people. 'Being part of a Yarning Circle is a unique and powerful way for Aboriginal people to connect with each other. The experience connects us all spiritually and culturally and allows us to grow through discussion and sharing of life experiences and world views' (Chapman and Whiteford, 2017). Chapter 11 of this book *Pathways That Enable Equity in Higher Education: An overview of the Open Foundation Programme at the University of Newcastle, Australia and the Experiences of Mature-Age, First-in-Family, Regional, and Online Students* and Chapter 7 *Life Experiences of Migrant Student Mothers as Agents of Change within Higher Education in the United Kingdom* both provide descriptive accounts of life experience as valuable in the eyes of educators and institutions. The degree of alignment, or otherwise, of work experience and life experience in the literature is potentially a focus of enquiry in its own right, though outside the scope of this review for the present time.

It could be argued that boundary crossing of a different but related kind, between prior work experience and higher education itself, has received less attention, at least in describing conceptual frameworks. Can boundary-crossing theory be adequately applied to this experience? This is significant for institutions who cater for mature students with widening access backgrounds who seek to develop pedagogical and educational thinking and practices for this purpose (Uddin, 2022, 2023). The Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning (CAEL) was founded in 1974 on the revolutionary principle (at the time) that 'adult learners should be met where they are' with a mission to develop 'mutually beneficial links between curricula and careers' ¹. The Open University, UK, has a similar mission in providing recognised qualifications to working people while in work.²

Boundary crossing is a phenomenon that involves (re-) establishing continuity across different contexts (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011). This is a socio-personal process for students and a pedagogical process for educators formulating curricula. Arts and Bronkhorst (2020) provide an in-depth cross-case analysis of the boundary-crossing support provided in four HE programmes of study in the Netherlands. This study is particularly significant as its focus is on connecting student learning in their HE programme to their work life which is not part of their programme, in contrast to what they term 'dual education'. Their results indicated that 'brokers, boundary objects, hybrid practices, boundary interactions, degrees of freedom, degrees of clarity, and supervision are ways to support boundary crossing' (Arts and Bronkhorst, 2020). Boundary crossing emphasises 'learning processes negotiated across two physical and social settings and individuals' placements within and on boundaries of such settings' (Billett, 2014). However, while studies on boundary crossing emphasise

that boundaries carry learning potential, it is not clearly explained how this occurs (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011).

Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of social fields, which has been critically evaluated in the context of education by Hilgers and Mangez (2014), Eyal (2012) considers boundaries as a useful concept not simply to separate experiences but to create a 'zone of essential connections and transactions between them' (p.162). The space between boundaries is useful because things can occur within it that cannot occur inside the separate and established experiences, i.e., work or higher education.

Billett (2014) has written extensively on the nature of this space in the context of vocational training enacted in educational settings and sees it from the point of view of tertiary education students 'who have to engage in those contextualising processes and identify and respond to boundaries of which they may or may not be aware, and whose typification may be highly idiosyncratic'. He says the integration of these experiences 'goes way beyond linking theory to practice, and emphasise the use and reconciliation of what is experienced in distinct social and physical settings to build and extend individuals' knowledge arising from and being reconciled for those settings' (Billett, 2014, P.7).

Pedagogical Implications

The field of education needs clear exemplars and working groups to apply knowledge of the linking and integration of experiences across different settings to the curriculum, especially since explanatory accounts of what constitutes such integration diverge. As Billett (2014) puts it 'to be effective in achieving particular educational outcomes such linking and reconciliations may need to be supported and guided by others, and engaged with effortfully by those who are learning'.

For educators, they must adequately support mature students in connecting their learning within an educational programme to their past or present work life, with the adoption and deployment of pedagogical and educational thinking. This way 'the learning process can be seen as a process of contextualization (i.e. embodiment) and de-contextualization (i.e. disembodiment) and then a re-contextualization (i.e. re-embodiment)' (Billett, 2013). Therefore, we need educators who can act as a mentor and a guide where 'the teacher's role is no longer to dispense the truth, but rather to help guide the student in the conceptual organization of certain areas of experience' and that 'we come to see knowledge and competence as products of the individual's conceptual organization of the individual's experience' (Von Glaserfeld, 1987, p. 48).

Uddin (2023) describes the need for deliberate structures for programmes to connect with work-life which, in common with the focus of Arts and Bronkhorst's research (2020), is not part of the formal HE programme and which may not be generalisable to context-independent learning:

To ensure WAMS [Widening Access for Mature Students] are successfully integrated within the HE environment, providers must have systematic and deliberate structures, systems and strategies in place, and their staff must have or be working towards having the capacity, capability, work culture, values, and behaviours to implement the strategies to support WAMS. Alignment of mission, strategies, structure, systems, and staff is needed to ensure long term success.

(Uddin, 2023)

In tandem with this, Uddin (2023) highlights the need for a comprehensive qualitative benchmarking exercise with other providers who recruit WAMS in their undergraduate courses. Chapter 4 in this book reports on one such exercise and more ambitious benchmarking exercises are justified in the light of the importance of the endeavour. Qualitative benchmarking in education internationally has been recently described in the context of library, information and education services (Baker et al., 2023). The purpose of qualitative benchmarking is to enable an organisation to measure and improve its performance by comparing itself with the best in the sector. In this context it provides formal and deliberate opportunities for academic leaders to reflect on comparable data and assess how effective their current arrangements are in meeting the needs of WAMS. Uddin describes the aim of gathering detailed data and exemplars demonstrating providers' approach to the place of work (life) experience in HE and how they support iterative interactions between academic content and work experience. An excerpt of Uddin's proposed benchmarking questions is shown below:

- A How does your institution conceptualise the relationship between work experience and academic content via high-level statements or scholarly work by staff?
- B Does your institution have learning and teaching strategies to provide students with opportunities to connect their work experience with the academic content?
- C Does your institution have an explicit staff training and development plan so that the staff have the commitment and capabilities to support students to establish connection between work experience and academic content?

Findings from Recognition of Prior Learning

The literature on the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) provides important clues to illuminate the issue of boundaries and boundary crossing from work to education. The essence of RPL, which is relevant here, is that while knowledge gained from work and life experience are recognised as 'equally' valuable as formal, academic knowledge, these two types of knowledge are not the

same. Furthermore, experiential knowledge does not automatically provide a reasonable basis for access to academic study.

In the past, APL or APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning) has been used as a term to ensure that vocational skills and experience are recorded as equal to those of academic certification as proposed by Dearing (1997). This term has now largely been replaced by RPL. For several decades the treatment of RPL in the literature has been as a tool to map one body of knowledge – knowledge of work, against another – academic knowledge (Clarke and Warr, 1997; Heath, 2001; Hull, 1992). Assessment requires certain skills and is considered specialised pedagogy in its own right. In South Africa, expertise to assess RPL takes on a social justice dimension in ‘through its potential to widen access to learning opportunities for those previously denied them under apartheid’ (Cooper and Harris, 2013). In other areas of the world, some practitioners have cautioned that RPL can simply be a way of assisting adults with few qualifications to enter the system (Hull, 1992). What is needed is an exploration of the relationship between the two; the architecture of the thought processes transferred from one to another within the space created during movement between life/work experience and curriculum and back again. The literature on RPL does not seem to deliver this. Billett (2014) asks a similar question about the integration of experiences within workplaces with educational programmes: ‘[T]he bases for organising and securing such integrations remain unclear. There are quite diverse explanatory accounts about what constitutes such integrations’.

Kolb’s experiential learning cycle theorises experience and reflects on experience as the basis for new learning. This highlights the valuing of knowledge produced in informal contexts such as work and life experiences (Kolb, 1984). Breier and Ralphs (2009) argue that ‘a greater understanding of the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* (a type of wisdom or intelligence relevant to practical action) would make an important contribution to the conceptualization and implementation of Recognition (Assessment) of Prior Learning (RPL/APL) in formal education contexts’ (Breier and Ralphs, 2009).

Prior learning has been discussed more recently with reference to Quality Assurance (Gamble, 2009; Stephens, 2022). In one assessment of RPL in post-graduate programmes the theories of Bernstein are drawn on to identify different forms of knowledge and the ways in which that knowledge might be transformed and formulated as curricula (Cooper and Harris, 2013). Bernstein argues that different forms of knowledge possess stronger or weaker boundaries and that some degree of ‘pedagogic agency’ is operating in the space created as there is movement between knowledge production and curriculum, for instance between theoretical and practical knowledge (Bernstein, 2000). The edges that surround different disciplines can be well insulated or porous when it comes to the importation from other disciplines or knowledge domains. Gamble (Gamble, 2009) provides a useful argument that vocational courses delivered in tertiary

education institutions draw on two forms of knowledge: conceptual knowledge and everyday empirical knowledge. Different curricula operationalise different combinations of these two. Bernstein's seminal work, published more than twenty years ago, is still inspiring scholars to ask about the nature of knowledge, ontological properties of knowledge in this context and how Bernstein's work can be used to address social inequalities (McLean et al., 2013).

As a note of caution, some scholars have noted that RPL can reinforce lower expectations among socio-economically vulnerable groups and even as a potential tool of governmental control if it continues to place responsibility for learning on students, for instance as found in Spain (Chisvert-Tarazona et al., 2019). Similarly, in Australia, Pitman and Vidovich state that 'RPL is more likely to be operationalized for strategic reasons relating to competitive university positioning within the sector, than for pedagogic motivations' (Pitman and Vidovich, 2016).

Methodology and Next Steps

To complement the benchmarking approach described above, Uddin proposes the incorporation of life history methodology to capture and develop the perspective of mature students from widening access backgrounds (Uddin, 2022, 2023). His own account of boundary crossing is powerfully documented.

As a child I studied in one of the poorest schools in Chittagong, Bangladesh, where I had to memorise facts, figures and knowledge by rote in a class of 80 students. I felt like a prisoner in my class and I was happy to skip classes week after week... I used to travel approximately seven miles by bus to the Chittagong Division Library. I now realise that I enjoyed the travelling and the environment of the library as much as I enjoyed reading a wide range of books, fictional and non-fictional. The independent learning habit and confidence I developed during that phase of my life, travelling alone to a city from a village, helped me to become a self-directed, self-taught and self-made individual in my adult life.

(Uddin, 2023)

There is something important in this extract about the value of travelling to a place of learning and about its hard-won nature that can be instructive pedagogically. In the disciplines of Social Anthropology and Sociology, the technique of life history is well established and is particularly applied to marginalised groups (Goodson, 2001). Life history interviewing is a qualitative method of data collection where researchers collect and analyse detailed personal narratives from individuals to understand their experiences over time, often focusing on key 'turning points' that significantly shaped their lives within their social and historical context. Uddin (2023) includes a life history of a student called AJ, an entrepreneur who successfully graduated from Nelson College London

at the age of 55 having experienced extraordinary commercial success followed by bankruptcy in his life prior to study. In one interview with AJ, when asked to recall the academic theories and concepts he remembers from his course 'he could not recollect any, but instead provided the interviewer with a list of abstract rules he developed and now follows'. This information provides fertile ground for further investigation in relation to integration, transfer and boundary crossing. It truly prompts us to consider the question of knowledge construction in the lacunae between work and education.

Notes

- 1 <https://www.cael.org/about-us/history-mission-vision>.
- 2 <https://business.open.ac.uk/develop-your-workforce/vocational-qualifications>.

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INDEX

Page numbers in *italic* refer to figures and page numbers in **bold** refer to tables.

- academic pathway 6–7, 27–29, **37**, 43–44, 51, 54, 60–63, 138–140, 146, 172–179, 214, 262
- academic performance 3–8, 27–32, 41, 46, 63, 67–68, 73, 79, 82–83, 92–94, 104, 118–121, 125–128, 139, 157–169, 175, 212–219, 224, 254, 261–262, 266, 278; attainment 14, 126, 138, 144, 232, 246–247
- academic staff 5, 28, 32, 38, **39**, 42, 45, 51, 61–63, 80, 84, 96, 100–103, 109–110, 121–122, 125, 134, 143, 152, 161, 167, 175–176, 201, 207, 214–215, 218, 224, 229–254, 270, 278
- access and participation plans 5, 59, 134–135, 246–247, 250
- agent of change 4, 7, 114–117, 123–128, 273
- annual leave *see* paid leave
- Artificial Intelligence (AI) 8, 208
- Arts University Plymouth 19, 53, 134, 142, 144–145
- asylum seeker *see* refugee
- Australia 6–8, 12–17, 19, **22**, 27–45, 51–63, 157–161, 165–169, 172–179, 216–217, 276, 280
- barriers to higher education 5, 13, 21, 52, 60–63, 72, 81–83, 91–92, 103–112, 136, 138–139, 142–143, 158, 163–169, 175–178; alienation 261; classism 118–120, 138, 188–189, 262, 269; competing commitments 50, 92, 125, 139, 173, 187, 234–237; cost 61–62, 70–71, 91–93, 97, 102, 112, 119, 122, 125, 135–136, 149, 160–168, 177, 185, 250, 253; cultural values 105, 161; gender inequality 16, 105–112, 139; racism 4, 12, 101–103, 127, 157, 185–186, 260, 262; rural living 62, 107–110, 165, 172, 177–179, 217
- benchmarking 7–8, 50–53, 56, 63, 266, 270, 278–280
- branding *see* marketing
- bursary *see* scholarships and grants
- Canada 13, 17, **23**, 159, 216
- caring responsibilities 4, 12, 54, 70–72, 76, 79, 89, 107, 116, 122, 136, 140, 178, 230–238
- childcare 54, 72, 76–78, 88–89, 97, 100, 107–109, 117–125, 233, 250, 253
- Colombia 18, **23**
- commercialisation 4, 187
- community engagement 63, 104, 129, 174, 249, 250; outreach 54, 108, 159, 174, 179, 245–252
- constructivism 149–152, 225, 228
- cost of living crisis 70, 166, 185, 253
- COVID-19 pandemic 5, 8, 15, 177–178, 185, 189, 223–230, 232–238

- curriculum 37, 46, 134, 143, 150, 168, 173, 176, 179, 262–264, 273–279; course modules 20, 76–80, 88, 201–202, 215, 230
 curriculum vitae (CV) 197, 205
- data collection 8, 56, 83, 159, 280; standardisation 8, 19, 154
- definition of mature student 3–4, 6, 11–13, 16–18, 29, 32, 34, **35**, 45, 57, 91, 172, 187, 216–217, 223
- demographics 4, 32–33, 59, 74–79, 83, 93, 138, 159–160, 245, 259–264; age 3–4, 11–20, 27–35, 45, 50–52, 55–56, 58, 62, 68, 82, 84, 91, 93, 98, 106–108, 112, 119, 135–138, 140, 143–146, 157–160, 172–173, 176, 184–185, 217, 219, 223, 227, 245, 250, 260–263, 268; disability 15, 139, 250, 260, 266; gender 15–16, 33–34, 44, **99**, 105, 109–112, 139, 160, 190, 266; religion 122, 127–128, 135
- Denmark 12, 21
- deprivation 13, 19, 62, 266
- digital 7–8, 62, 68, 73–80, 83, 87–88, 103–104, 125, 197, 205, 216, 225–226, 231, 250; literacy 5, 142–143; solutions 3
- disruption to education 96–104
- diversity 4–7, 12, 30, 79–80, 93, 98, 101, 106, 109–110, 115–116, 148–149, 153, 169, 174, 178, 183, 217–219, 260, 269, 272
- East Anglia University 53
- economic development and regeneration 15, 17, 59–60, 92, 112, 146, 272
- education: flexible 7, 46, 81, 91, 95, 99–100, 104, 109–112, 115–116, 122, 166, 172–173, 176–177, 245–247; full-time 5, 12, 14–15, 17, 22, 91, 137, 160, 219, 244, 260; part-time 14–17, 58, 91, 98, 106, 111, 116, 119, 135–137, 160, 217, 226, 230, 244–245
- educational environment 5, 7, 31, 51, 68, 80–81, 91, 97, 100–101, 104, 110, 139, 142–144, 149, 153, 161–163, 167–169, 173–177, 187, 189, 225, 229, 235, 248, 253, 261, 268–274, 278, 280
- educational technology 62, 91, 179, 188, 216, 225, 231, 237
- educative trauma 4, 157
- employment 5–8, 13, 15, 18, 21, 29–30, 34, 45, 51, 54, 68–70, 75, 80, 83, 86, 92–94, 97, 110, 116–125, 129, 137, 145, 157, 162–163, 166, 185, 195–196, 201, 203, 207–208, 224, 252, 268–272; employability 6, 27–30, 45, 50, 67, 74, 83, 122–129, 196–197, 202; unemployment 15, 59, 70, 216, 219
- extracurricular activities 250
- financial aid 8, 18, 78, 88, 92, 104, 111–112, 120, 125, 163–168, 177
- first generation students 158, 172, 177, 260, 276
- frameworks 5, 8, 82, 94, 105, 136, 142, 148, 150, 186–187, 189–190, 225–226, 236, 247, 255, 259, 262, 270, 273, 276
- G20 14–17
- Global domesticity 183–190
- Global North 4–5, 8, 11, 14, 18, 263
- global south 21
- globalisation 272
- Government schemes 36–41, 98, 158, 173
- Griffith University 52–54
- Hong Kong 16, **23**
- immigration 114–116, 122–129
- inclusivity 4, 28, 31, 42, 62–63, 91–92, 112, 122, 134, 137, 149, 153, 161–162, 168, 173–176, 184–185, 215–217, 259–262, 269–270
- indigenous students 4, 17, 59–62, 157–169, 174, 177
- information, advice and guidance (IAG) 5, 245–255
- Institute of Contemporary Music Performance 54
- Institution mission 28, 32, 37, **38**, 40, 55, 145, 276, 278
- Istituto Marangoni 54
- Japan 18
- labour market (job market) 58, 93–94, 98, 166, 213, 272
- Latvia 18
- learner-centred instruction 149
- learning management systems 216
- learning: hybrid 8, 30, 46, 76, 79, 88, 100, 104, 231, 236, 276; in person/in-class 74, 153, 186, 233, 253; lifelong 5, 15, 82, 91–95, 137, 144–146, 174, 227, 246–248, 273; online/virtual/distance

- 62, 91, 99, 175, 178, 216, 219, 224–226, 229–230, 234–238, 251; self-directed 31, 148, 152–153, 280; separative 275; work-based 3, 7, 15, 80, 244, 273
- Libraries 41, 45, 62, 103, 143, 162, 231, 278–280
- life experience 34–35, 45, 59, 82, 91, 110, 138, 143–144, 176, 246, 254, 276–279
- Liverpool Hope University 183–184
- Liverpool John Moores University 184
- marketing 36, **37**, **43**, 44, 56, 80, 183–190, 195, 198, 201, 205, 246
- massification of higher education 4, 264, 272
- mature student disadvantages 12–15, 46, 115–119, 122, 134–138, 146, 166, 172, 175–176, 178, 260–261
- mental health 5, 62, 72, 100, 139–140, 162–164, 168, 186, 213, 250; adaptability 18, 67, 80–82, 91, 112, 120, 141, 164, 178, 188, 216, 219, 225–226, 229–230, 234–237, 270, 274–275; isolation 5, 8, 106–108, 175, 232, 236–237; loneliness epidemic 5, 8, 185–189, 236; motivation 8, 13, 80, 108, 116–118, 125, 127–129, 137, 149–150, 153, 164–165, 189, 208, 247, 250–254, 280; resilience 68, 139–143, 164–165; self-confidence/assertiveness 6, 15, 20–21, 59, 68, 72, 75, 108, 117, 119, 121, 139, 143, 153, 163–164, 219, 224, 266, 275; sense of belonging 21, 62, 108, 118, 139–141, 142, 167, 177, 183, 185, 188–190, 217, 224, 253–255
- mentorships 20, 91–92, 106, 111, 121, 202, 213, 277
- Mexico 17, **23**, 53–55, 63, 213
- military service 18, 58–59, 101, 139
- Nelson College London 7, 32, 52, 55, 67, 200, 280
- neoliberalism 46
- networking 7, 21, 52, 69, 72, 75, 77–78, 81, 86–87, 107, 110–111, 142, 161, 174, 195–197, 205–206, 209, 231, 249, 254
- New Zealand 13–14, 19
- Newcastle University 7, 172–173, 179, 276
- Nigeria 4, **22**, 53, 55, 63, 91–112
- North Texas University 59
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 14, 17–18, 27, 29, 50, 272
- paid leave 92–95
- pedagogy 134, 139, 173, 179, 225, 269, 279
- peer assisted learning (PAL) 20–21
- POLAR 12, 138, 245
- policy and legislation 12–13, 19, 27, 63, 91, 111, 115–116, 120, 123–125, 128, 167, 179, 186, 188, **227**, 246–253, 259–262
- postgraduate studies 15–16, **33**, 34, 77, 86, 145, 166–168, 185, 213, 217, 223, 226, **227**, 279
- progression 16, 19, 21, 53, 82–83, 98, 102, 129, 145–146, 207, 245–247, 265, 268
- Reading University 60, 139
- Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) (prior education/experience) 6, **36**, 79, 137, 143, 153, 219, 250, 278–279
- refugee 15, 127
- representation 4–5, 12–13, 17–18, 20, 34, 39, 44, 54, 94, 109, 116, 134, 138, 157–159, 178–179, 184–185, 245–246, 249, 253–254, 260–262, 270
- research: case studies 7, 62, 70, 72, 89, 101, 110, 151–153, 183–184; interviews 20, 83, 122, 135, 141, 226–228, 268, 280–281; models 8, 104, 116–117, 124, 143, 145–146, 159–164, 166–168, 183, 186–187, 190, 216, 225–226, 228, 238, 260–262, 268, 275; statistics 4, 11–23, 34, 139, 144, 157–158, 173, 185, 223, 229, 265; surveys 14–15, 22, 27–28, 31–33, 40, 42, 44–45, 50–51, 56, 67, 72–88, 135, 137, 139, 141–152, 160, 185–187, 196, 209, 265, 268; workshops 52–57, 61, 76, 78, 81, 83, 88, 162, 207–209, 217, 220, 253
- retrain *see* upskill
- return to study 15, 27, 60, 91, 96, 105, 110, 118, 149, 216, 260
- scholarships and grants 54, 84, 97, 104, 111, 119, 125, 162–163, 166–168, 218–219, 250, 264
- social life/interactions (personal relationships, friendships) 8, 21, 38, 52–53, 67–69, 71–72, 75, 79, 83, 86, 121, 125, 143, 149, 151–153, 161, 166, 173, 177, 187, 197, 226, 232, 235, 255, 261

- social media 7, 127, 195–198, 204–209, 237, 254–255; LinkedIn 7, 195–209
- social mobility 4, 92, 245, 247, 260
- South Africa 4, 16–17, 22, 279
- stakeholders 51, 53, 100, 114–116, 121–123, 129, 165, 255
- strike action 96–100
- student: accommodation 70, 106, 162, 168, 184, 250, 253; admission 4, 12–14, 19–21, 41, 56, 110, 173, 179, 184, 266; empowerment 3–4, 58, 60, 63, 92, 112, 117, 126–127; engagement 5–8, 28, 30–38, **39**, 54, 57–58, 62–63, 72, 83, 104, 109, 126–129, 140, 149, 154, 158, 164–165, 175, 188, 200, 237, 244, 254–255; preparation (readiness) 6–7, 19–20, 29–30, 37, 43–44, 46, 56, 149, 172–175, 179, 236; recruitment 3–4, 6–7, 15, 28, 31, 45, 51, 56–63, 136–137, 140, 146, 160, 168, 183, 187, 190, 195, 198, 201, 226, 246, 251, 264, 270, 278; retention 3, 6, 8, 37, 41, 45, 51, 53–54, 58, 62, 118, 120, 126, 136, 140, 152, 157, 168, 201, 217, 246, 253–254
- student debt 70, 81, 95, 104, 125, 135, 264
- student parents (SP) 13, 21, 54, 72, 105, 114–127, 177; Migrant Student Mothers (MSM) 114–129, 276; Student Mothers (SM) 114–122
- study skills 6, 142, 143, 183–184, 186
- support services 32–34, 43–46, 106, 120, 176, 214, 268; academic 7, 61, 78, 83–84, 88, 91, 104, 111, 121, 125, 128, 139, 164–165, 168, 212, 214, 220, 261, 265; counselling 36, 76, 79, 88, 91, 100, 106, 119, 214, 217, **227**; holistic 167–168, 176, 186, 246–247
- Sweden 18
- Switzerland 18
- transition to higher education 7, 53, 84, 137, 174, 179, 217, 248, 249, 253–254, 259
- Turkey 18
- UK: England 11–15, 19, **22–23**, 119, 217, 244–246, 259–260, 263, 266–267; House of Commons 11–12, 14; Northern Ireland 16; Office for Students (OfS) 11–12, 15, 120, 125, 136, 144, 244, 246, 259, 263–268; Scotland 15, 266; Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) 14, 184, 266; Wales 15, 266
- undergraduate studies 13, 16–17, 34, 159; BA 53, 138–140, 151, 200, 204, **227**
- United Nations: UNESCO 100
- United States 14, 55, 216
- University of Chihuahua 55, 212–215
- University of Jos 55, 91–92, 96, **99**, 100–112
- University of Iowa 55
- University of Liverpool 183–184
- University of Oxford 52
- University of the West Indies *see* West Indies
- upskill 6, 15, 18, 29, 93, 252
- vocational education 6, 15, 18, **33**, 50, 52, 60, 108, 116, 137, 187, 216, 263–264, 272–273, 277, 279; polytechnic 244, 248, 264
- West Indies 17
- withdrawal from higher education 67, 82–83, 97, 110, 217, 260–261