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SYNOPSIS: LITERATURE REVIEW ON MATURE AGE STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Access and Recruitment

Key themes: Sector challenges including changes in the policy context for IAG and lifelong learning; career progression and identity change as motivators for higher education; risks and learner identity; situational barriers and competing priorities, alternative and flexible study, IAG, partnerships with FE/communities, supporting the learners' current studies, using alumni, inter-generational outreach, recognition of prior experiential learning (RPEL)

- **49% fall** between 2006-2017[1] although numbers are increasing (25+ driving this trend) and **part-time** UG numbers from 301K to ~133K from 2010/11 – 2021-22[1].
- Mature students viewed as '**hard to reach group**' in recruitment activities when compared to young students due to traditional outreach being focused on schools and colleges. It has been proposed **social** and **cultural capital influences decisions**[2] and the motivations to study being heterogenous in this group, in which critical incidents (divorce or bereavement for example) possibly playing a part in decisions. Learning organisations need to better understand the complex needs of adults and be more aware of structural and cultural factors (including gender and poverty) influencing participation in higher education (HE).[3]
- HE institutes tend to assume '**imagined barriers**' to access, but evidence shows that '**real barriers**' exist and are associated with institutional factors, such as admissions procedures, timing and scale of provision, and general lack of institutional flexibility[4].
- Mature students are more likely to **choose local** - reputation may come into play but accessibility is most important.[5]

[1] Mature and part-time students - https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/3da8f27a-333f-49e7-acb3-841feda54135/topic-briefing

[2] Burke, P.J. & Hayton, A. (2012) Is widening participation still ethical?, Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning, Volume 13, Number 1, 1 January 2012, pp. 8-26(19), https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.13.1.8

[3] Gallacher, J., Crossan, B., Field, J., & Merrill, B. (2002). Learning careers and the social space: Exploring the fragile identities of adult returners in the new further education. International Journal of Lifelong Education, 21, 493–509. doi: 10.1080/0260137022000016172

[4] Fuller, A., Foskett, R., Paton, K., & Maringe, F. (2008). Barriers to participation in higher education? Depends who you ask and how. Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning, 10, 6–17.

[5] Elliot, D.L. & Brna, P. (2009) "I Cannot Study Far from Home": Non-traditional learners participation in degree education" Journal of Further and Higher Education 33(2):105-117. DOI: 10.1080/03098770902856645

- Career development is key motivator for mature students - **vocational** based programmes are most attractive to mature students.[6]
- Mature students can view studying in **HE as risky both financially and chances of success with the benefits not being guaranteed.** Challenges of identity change, family expectations, fear of academic failure and lack of confidence, are consistent themes in the literature.[6,7] Poor experiences of past education is a potential discouraging factor in mature learner engagement – particularly in working class mature students.[8]
- Lack of availability of **alternative and flexible modes of provision** is a limiting factor. Due to a range of issues out of the student's control (i.e. caring responsibilities, work) – may have no other choice than to study **part-time**.[9] Repeated theme within the literature is that mature students are more **debt averse**, more likely to **combine work and study** and concerned about the **financial implications of studying** (particularly women) and were uncertain about the purpose, demands and value of HE.[10]
- Continuing to **provide flexible routes** into education stands out as a main conclusion of MillionPlus (2018b). This report puts a focus on the decline in those studying "other" degrees which provide opportunities for students to progress to full degrees (as well as meeting skills needs) (i.e. courses of study that lead to a qualification at level 4 or 5 such as, foundation degrees, HNCs, HNDs)[11] – This is particularly importance in relation to the new **lifelong learning loan** due to be implemented in 2025 academic year.
- The **self-evaluation framework** published by OFFA (2017) was designed to help HEIs to review their outreach approaches to adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds using a **3-step evaluation process**.[12]
- **Information, advice and guidance (AIG)** about a course plays a role in mature students decision making pre transition. Clarity of the university's procedures is important, particularly since mature students require a greater level of detail, such as around the structure of a course, than younger students (e.g. around **timetabling, finance, choice of modes, information provision, availability of childcare** etc).[13]
- Clearly differentiating how and what is available to adults, and having clear entry requirements and routes is crucial.[14]
- Consider how to **support** mature applicants that come through clearing as support is often missing in this route.
- The **OfS suggests that IAG is a key part of the outreach for mature learners**. HEIs can provide IAG to mature learners in different ways, including events as well as bespoke support i.e. running an **Access to HE Conference** for local college students; **IAG sessions**; support with **UCAS statements**; and student **finance** sessions. A case study noted by the OfS: **The Humber outreach programme** - workshops for adult learners looking at changing career pathways (contents include what it is like to be an adult student and issues around financial constraints).[15]

[6] Million+ & National Union of Students (2012) Never to late to learn: mature students in higher education, London: NUS and Million+.

[7] Chapman, A. (2017) Using the assessment process to overcome Imposter Syndrome in mature students, Journal of Further and Higher Education, 41:2, 112-119, DOI: 10.1080/0309877X.2015.1062851

[8] Thorpe A, Snell M, Hoskins S , Bryant J (2007) False uniqueness: the self-perception of new entrants to higher education in the UK and its implications for access - a pilot study , Higher Education Quarterly, Vol 61, No 1, 3-22

[9] Butcher, J. (2015) 'Shoe-horned and side-lined'?: Challenges for part-time learners in the new HE landscape, Higher Education Academy.

[10] Twigg-Flesner, A. (2017) How does the decision-making process in university choices vary based on age, gender and ethnicity? NEON Summer Symposium https://www.educationopportunities.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/University-Centre-Hartpury-How-does-the-decision-making-process-in-university-choices-vary-based-on-age-gender-and-ethnicity.pdf

[11] MillionPlus (2018a) Research Report: Forgotten Learners - Building a system that works for mature learners, London: MillionPlus.

[12] OFFA (2017b) A three-step evaluation tool for outreach to adults from disadvantaged backgrounds

[13] Smith, J. (2008) Evidence Net: Mature Learners - a synthesis of research, York: Higher Education Academy.

[14] McDonald, C. (2016) Supporting Mature Learners, NEON Summit https://www.educationopportunities.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Supporting-Mature-Learners-Caroline-McDonald-Birkbeck-1.pdf

[15] OfS (no date) Topic Briefing: Mature and Part-time Students, https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/3da8f27a-333f-49e7-acb3-841feda54135/topic-briefing_mature-students.pdf

- Some literature highlights the need for **evening/weekend activities** (e.g. come and meet us sessions, open days) and offering **'lots of dip in an out' engagement** for mature learners.[14]
- OFFA (2017) suggests that to be effective, outreach with adults should contain the following features: it needs to **build confidence** through supported small steps and **tasters of HE**; it has to be delivered in a **flexible** way, at **low cost** to students, and with **low-risk**, and to be as **personalised** as possible; it needs to **bridge the informal-formal learning** divide, and **offer clear pathways**. The suggestion is that such an approach can **counter adults feeling they 'did not belong', and feeling HE was 'out of reach'**.[16]
- **Local community-based outreach**:
  - **Leeds University Lifelong Learning Centre (LLC)** utilises local community adult engagement as a key factor in the LLC maintaining its **part-time recruitment** numbers bucking national PT trends. The centre delivers six foundation level programmes with progression to all faculties at Leeds and also provides **academic, pastoral and employability skills support** to mature and part-time students throughout the University.
  - **The University of Sheffield and their centre for lifelong learning** approach includes giving mature learners the opportunity to have an experience of HE education – this includes a **6 week-long and 'bitesize' discovery courses** – as well as other recruitment strategies such as subject tasters, IAG, 'student story' videos, Ambassador Q&As and chat, and sessions on student finance.[17]
  - Callendar et al (2014) analysis of access type provision run at **children's centres for mothers** found that local partnerships were significant in **recruiting to the courses**: for many course participants the initial decision to join the course was opportunistic.[18]
- Some HEIs have created **admissions barriers** (intentionally/un-intentionally) to mature students gaining access to HE[13]. Recognition of **prior experiential learning** is an important area to consider when reviewing admissions policies; with the idea to **recognise alternative non-formal** and **informal learning experiences**. Practically this means recognising that life (informal learning) and work experience (non-formal learning) are just as important as formal education for gaining skills.[19]

[16] Office for Fair Access (OFFA) (2017) Understanding the impact of outreach on access to higher education for disadvantaged adult learners. Office for Fair Access.

[17] Kitchen, W. & Roy, H. (2020) Access, participation & success – degrees with integrated foundation year for mature students at the University of Sheffield NEON Summit https://www.educationopportunities.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/University-of-Sheffield-Dr-Willy-Kitchen-Head-of-Department-for-Lifelong-Learning-and-Helen-Roy-Marketing-and-External-Relations-Manager.pdf

[18] Callender, C., Hawkins, E., Jackson, S., Jamieson, A., Land, H., and Smith, H. (2014) 'Walking tall': A critical assessment of new ways of involving student mothers in higher education, Birkbeck and UCL Institute of Education University of London.

[19] Cameron, R. and Harrison, J.L. (2012) 'The interrelatedness of formal, non-formal and informal learning: Evidence from labour market program participants', Australian Journal of Adult Learning, 52, (2), 277-309

Access and Recruitment Recommendations:

- Offering flexible part-time options is probably the key to attracting more mature students onto HE courses, especially if they offer clear vocational pathways. More routes into HE (e.g. qualifications at level 4) would also benefit the 'pipeline' to HE.
- Whether provision is full or part time, this group will tend to get most benefit from a bespoke offer that takes account of all the other responsibilities/constraints on their learning (employment, family commitments etc), but integrated into wider community and support to prevent marginalisation within the HE community.
- Mature students represent a wide range of groups and circumstances. Understanding the different motivational factors (both intrinsic and extrinsic) for different groups of mature learners could help with more targeted approaches to recruitment and outreach.
- Locally based recruitment activities are probably going to work best, especially accessible (time, place etc) and 'low risk' community based opportunities to engage with higher education experiences over time. This could include targeting activities to support mature learners already returned to education, and/or others in the wider community through partnership working. Universities that have sustained lifelong learning departments/functions have demonstrated success in maintaining mature student recruitment, particularly where they offer different types of bridging provision (which has been recommended by OfS).
- As well as raising understanding of the immediate and longer-term influences and benefits of HE for the individual (e.g. targeted details on destinations and earning capacity), pre-entry IAG is important to ensure mature students have accurate expectations about HE. Since they tend to have individualised needs and circumstances – often including experiencing life changes - an element of individualised personalised IAG will be needed. At the application stage, support with applications and financial aspects is also important.
- Many mature learners face dispositional and cultural barriers so outreach which builds their confidence is needed. Using mature students themselves or alumni to engage potential learners can be effective by provision inspirational role models and highlighting the transformational aspects of higher education.
- The collaborative Uni Connect widening access programme has been charged with an increasingly important role in provision of IAG to adults (and there were examples of existing collaborative projects through Uni Connect to engage adults for example through workshops on changing career pathways, group work, mentoring and inter-generational outreach).
- Overall, the nature of advice, admissions processes and the general approach towards mature students is going to be important to maximising mature learners' participation and experience of HE – particularly in terms of how the provision meets their needs and makes them feel more welcome at multiple stages. Undertaking the 3-step self-evaluation tool for outreach for adult learners from disadvantaged background could be a useful first step since the framework is designed to assess the clarity and coherence of the whole HE offer in terms of 'fit' with the needs of adult learners.

Pre-entry Transition

Key themes: targeted pre-entry orientation (e.g. mature learner summer schools), academic support, transition courses/additional HE provision.

- **Preparedness for academic study** stands out as an issue for pre-entry support. Having a good 'fit' between student and institutional expectations key – academic preparedness (course specific knowledge and generic independent learning skills) key area of focus.[20]
- Mature students may **not feel confident**, especially if they have been out of formal education for some time. May be particularly **anxious** about the **academic aspects** and **teaching modes** and are often bringing with them memories of a **negative experience in compulsory education**.
- Positive experiences of learning, and family background in learning, can engender a desire for more, but negative experiences of education have the reverse effect.[21]
- Those students from **working class** background[22], **first in family** and mature **women** students demonstrate **considerable self-doubt**, **lack of confidence** and **struggle with wider conflicting** family commitments.[23]
- Student **background** and **identity** are key issue for **working class students**, whose identities are influenced by previous and current experiences in **education** and their **social circumstances'** – generally low confidence in seeing themselves as successful learners when compared to students from more affluent backgrounds.[24]
- A students' prospects are shaped by **social position, education, familial and social experiences**.[25]
- The formation of new identities in transition depends on the interactions between **individual students, academic staff and other students**.[26]
- Key themes for pre-entry transition include **informing expectations; developing academic skills; building social capital; and nurturing a sense of belonging**.[27]
- Holistic approach to the mature student experience is likely to be more effective than one-off interventions.

[20] Gazeley, L. and Aynsley, S. (2012) The contribution of pre-entry interventions to student retention and success. A literature synthesis of the Widening Access Student Retention and Success National Programmes Archive. [online]. York: Higher Education Academy. Available from: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk//resources/detail/WP_syntheses/Gazeley_Aynsley

[21] Tuckett A & Field J (2016) 'Factors and motivations affecting attitudes towards and propensity to learn through the life course' https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a803e5040f0b62305b8a055/Skills_and_lifelong_learning_-_attitudes_to_learning.pdf

[22] Reay, D., Crozier, G., & Clayton, J. (2010). 'Fitting in' or 'standing out': working-class students in UK higher education. British Educational Research Journal, 36(1), 107–124.

[23] O'Shea, S., & Stone, C. (2011). Transformations and self-discovery: Mature-age women's reflections on returning to university study. Studies in Continuing Education, 33, 273–288. doi:10.1080/0158037X.2011.565046

[24] Crozier, G., D. Reay, J. Clayton, L. Colliander, and J. Grinstead. (2008) Different Strokes for Different Folks: Diverse Students in Diverse Institutions – Experiences of Higher Education, Research Papers in Education, 23 (2), 167–177. https://doi.org/10.1080/02671520802048703

[25] Stuart, M., Lido, C. and Morgan, J. (2012) 'Choosing a student lifestyle?'; questions of taste, cultural capital and gaining a graduate level job. In Hinton-Smith, T. (ed.), Widening Participation in Higher Education: Casting the net wide? London: Palgrave.

[26] O'Donnell, V. L., Kean, M., Stevens, G. (2016) Student transition in higher education: concepts theories and practices, York: HEA. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/downloads/student_transition_in_higher_education.pdf

[27] What Works? Student Retention & Success: Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: a summary of findings and recommendations from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme. https://www.phf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/What-Works-Summary-report.pdf
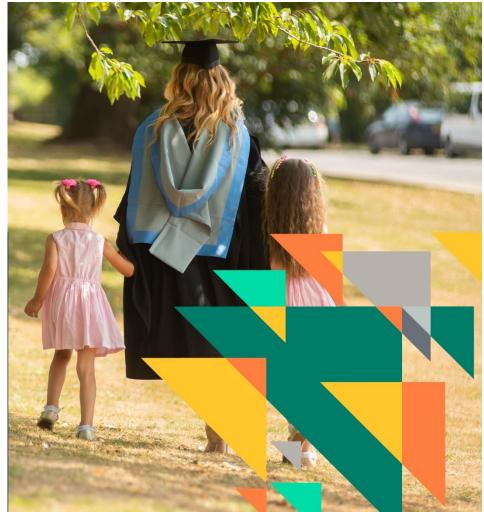
- Support for students who lack a background of HE should start pre-enrolment, drawing on processes which pick up on individuals' needs.[28]
  - May require systems whereby mature students can provide information about their needs.
  - A longitudinal study by MacFarlane (2018) at both a research-intensive and a diverse-entry institution points to the benefits of offering an immersive university experience. Immersion in a new field helps to **build learner identity** by students developing nuanced understanding of their previous education experiences and different learning cultures.[29]
- A range of pre-entry activities are identified in the literature and include: **post application Summer Schools** and/or specific inductions for mature learners; **mentoring / buddy scheme**; mature students' network; progression agreements; **Foundation Years**; and specific department dealing with mature students.
- Taking part in **'bridging' provision** helps students to prepare for HE study and has other benefits such as development of learner identity and social support networks. Examples of such programmes include:
  - Birbeck University – **Bridges to Birbeck** (https://www.bbk.ac.uk/professional-services/access); successes highlighted as: accessibility with part time and evening classes; the opportunity to practise assessments (particularly essay writing); giving presentations/speaking in front of a group; engaging in course content; supportive tutors; and trying different subject areas.[16]
  - University of Exeter – **Mature Access Pathway (MAP)** (https://www.exeter.ac.uk/students/wp-support/supportfor/maturestudents/); successes highlighted as offering contextual offers upon completion of programme; integration into FE access to HE programmes; PT and evening sessions; wellbeing, finance, expectations and student life are all explored as well as academic and study skills.
  - Staffordshire University – **'Step up to HE'** programme (https://www.staffs.ac.uk/course/step-up-to-higher-education); part-time option for mature students, especially those out of education for some time – focuses on helping students develop key academic skills, self-efficacy in a higher education environment, practical and professional advice on a one-to-one level.
- **Foundation years** have proved effective in **engaging non-traditional students**, overcoming access issues to full degrees, and engendering structural changes but serve to extend HE study (and the associated costs etc for students). Concept of foundation years is not new, and even the highly selective Russel group universities are implementing such programmes with 15 offering some sort of progression to UG for home/EU students.
  - In some instances, improved mature student **recruitment by 50% at University of Sheffield** as a result.[30]
- The Office for students have recommended developing **'bridging provision'** (including foundation years).[31]

[28] O'Shea, S. (2018). Considering the cultural strengths of older first-generation university students. In A. Bell & L. J. Santamaria (Eds.), Understanding experiences of first generation university students: Culturally responsive and sustaining methodologies. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

[29] MacFarlane, K 2018, 'Higher education learner identity for successful student transitions', Higher Education Research and Development, vol. 37, no. 6, pp. 1201-1215. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1477742

[30] Kitchen, W. & Roy, H. (2020) Access, participation & success – degrees with integrated foundation year for mature students at the University of Sheffield NEON Summit https://www.educationopportunities.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/University-of-Sheffield-Dr-Willy-Kitchen-Head-of-Department-for-Lifelong-Learning-and-Helen-Roy-Marketing-and-External-Relations-Manager.pdf

[31] Office for students (OfS) (2020) Topic Briefing: Mature students, https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/effective-practice/mature-students/

Pre-entry Transition Recommendations:

- Pre entry transition support can usefully benefit academic preparedness in terms of both course specific knowledge and generic independent learning skills. Raising mature learners' confidence and supporting notions of student identity are important as much in the pre-entry phase as post entry. Learners' orientation towards HE and expectations about studying should be taken into account, which could require targeted approaches. People out of education for some time, or with poor experiences of compulsory education, may benefit in particular, but the reasons for engaging with this provision needs to be clear and it needs to be accessible i.e. part time, evening.
- Immersive pre-entry activities (e.g. summer schools) may have a role to play for adults as well as young people.
- The nature of the interactions between individual students, academic staff and other students is important to mature learners' experience of HE transition. The process of building social connections in HE is also highlighted in the pre-entry phase, and there appears to be some examples of success using online solutions for this (with caveats about inclusivity). Buddying/mentoring schemes have been suggested for those who lack confidence. At the same time, an holistic life cycle approach to the mature student experience is likely to be more effective than one-off interventions.
- Taking part in 'bridging' provision helps students to prepare for HE study and has other benefits (e.g. development of learner identity and social support networks). There are numerous different models for this ranging from 'tasters' to access provision, foundation programmes and articulated qualifications (with flexibility and accessibility as underlying themes).

Transition and Student Experience

Key themes: imposter syndrome, competing demands, multiple identities, clear coherent induction programmes, developing self, academic writing and assessment support, peer support, targeted support/individual attention, assessment and feedback in the first year, sensitivity to the diversity of students commitments, formation of friendship groups, motivations, intersections of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, culture and gender, meaningful contact with academic staff.

- Main factors impacting on transition are: **insufficient funding**, **lack of childcare**, difficulties encountered with the **benefits system**, and the **lack of response** of institutions towards their needs.[32]
- Key external influences can be categorised as **familial**, **financial** and **personal**.[33]
- Mature students more likely to have multiple responsibilities and roles, such as **employment, caring responsibilities, additional financial constraints** i.e. childcare costs, mortgage – these '**real barriers**' can effect study time and negatively impact transition and progression into HE.[34]
- Literature highlights mature students more likely to **lack self-confidence** and a display a 'fragile' learner identity, especially in working-class students when compared a middle-class students.[35]
- **Socio-cultural barriers** to returning to education must not be underestimated.[36]
- Without support, **mature students can face particular challenges when transitioning** into provision that is design for 'traditional' students who are more confident HE learners – and such provision should be designed to develop a HE 'learner identity'.[30]
- Mature students not only try to cope with academic requirements, but note there are also **personal and emotional implications** (as well as coping with the academic aspects).
  - 'Becoming educated' threatens gender roles in the family as does the movement away from working class habitus.[37]
  - Can also potentially threaten other forms of belonging - the threat of losing oneself is as likely a prospect as finding oneself.[38]
- Compared to younger people, mature students tend to be less mobile, and since they are **less likely to live on campus** they can remain **detached from the student community**.[11]

[32] Bowl, M. (2010). Experiencing the barriers: non-traditional students entering higher education, Research Papers in Education, 16(2), 141–160.

[33] Walker, S. Dwyer, T, Sander, T, Moxham, L, Broadbent, M, Edwards, K (2014) Mature aged "baby boomer" students' contributions to understanding nursing education, Journal of Nursing Education and Practice., 4 (1) (2014), pp. 94-103

[34] Tones, M., Fraser, J., Elder, R. & White, K. (2009). Supporting mature-aged students from a low socioeconomic background, Higher Education, 58, 505–529.

[35] Crozier, G., D. Reay, J. Clayton, L. Colliander, and J. Grinstead. (2008) Different Strokes for Different Folks: Diverse Students in Diverse Institutions – Experiences of Higher Education, Research Papers in Education, 23 (2), 167–177. https://doi.org/10.1080/02671520802048703

[36] Gallacher, J., Crossan, B., Field, J., & Merrill, B. (2002). Learning careers and the social space: Exploring the fragile identities of adult returners in the new further education. International Journal of Lifelong Education, 21, 493–509. doi: 10.1080/0260137022000016172

[37] Baxter, A., & Britton, C. (2001) Risk, identity and change: Becoming a mature student. International Studies in Sociology of Education, 11, 87–104. doi:10.1080/0962021010020006

[38] Reay, D. (2001) Finding or Losing Yourself? Working-class Relationships to Education. Journal of Education Policy 16: 333-346.

- Mature students might **miss out on the social integration** aspects of transition due to other life commitments, and therefore potentially lack access to a key source of student support.
- Mature students have been shown to be **less likely to engage in the social aspects** of higher education. For example, commuting, part-time and students with family commitments found that social integration within university was difficult.
- **Education can be a great agent for change**, but the emotional element of learning may have a greater impact than anticipated.[39]
  - For the learners consulted in this study doing a degree improved self-esteem and brought a new set of freedoms and opportunities, but also new responsibilities, expectations and challenges.
- A qualitive study of first-year mature-age students showed that mature-age students encounter a **university culture dominated by younger students** who stigmatise older students.[40]
- **Post-entry transition support** (focusing on the early weeks) tends to be focused towards **promoting socialisation/formation of friendship groups**, and **clarifying expectations**, **developing academic confidence**, and **developing good relationships with members of staff**.[28]
- '**Enhanced induction**' programmes as well as ongoing **in-Course Support** activities has been seen as a way to address feelings of anxiety and having information (e.g. about timetables, reading lists etc) in advance also comes out as important for mature students with other commitments.[11]
- An understanding of what non-traditional students bring with them is important to understanding what colleges and universities must provide to assist them through the transitions of the college experience.[41]
- What non-traditional students valued most from campus leaders, faculty, staff, and other students was to be **treated like an adult**.[42]
- Mature students require 1) a basic orientation to the campus, 2) information about university practices and policies, 3) classes taught by faculty members who understand non-traditional students, 4) timely and clear communication, and 5) an understanding of the time constraints of non-traditional students.[42]
- A programme designed to help students develop their skills and enhance their academic performance via **workshops**, **web resources**, a series of **posters** and **booklets** and a **bibliotherapy service** have been shown to be **effective at developing and enhancing academic performance**.[11]
- A take home message from the literature on transition/the first year experience – where universities have offered extra support to help students cope with the academic demands of higher education study, offer promising practice, especially where they are linked to degree subjects and integrated into general provision.
- **Follow-up induction** for those who aren't able to attend induction is recommended.

[39] Walters, M. (2000) The mature students' three Rs, British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 28:2, 267-278, doi: 10.1080/03069880050013548

[40] Mallman, Mark & Lee, Helen. (2016). Stigmatised learners: mature-age students negotiating university culture. British Journal of Sociology of Education. 37. 1-18. 10.1080/01425692.2014.973017.

[41] Gordon, E. (2014) "Do I Have to Take This Class?" Nontraditional Students' Attitudes Toward and Perceptions of a Required Effective Learning Course, The Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 62:3, 163-172, DOI: 10.1080/07377363.2014.956029

[42] Wyatt, L. G. (2011). Nontraditional student engagement: Increasing adult student success and retention. The Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 59(1), 10–20. doi: 10.1080/07377363.2011.544977

- Use assessment process to overcome imposter syndrome in mature students. The **first assessment** can be a critical moment, and an emotional journey, in mature students' progression, particularly those who have been out of education for some time. **Early, low stakes assessment** may help to **build their academic confidence** and quick and concise feedback is also vital. [43]
    - **A positive early experience of studying is important to promote ongoing engagement in learning.**
- Students do learn from feedback and become able to **self-assess and monitor** their own learning and develop their own standards. Feedback is most productive if there is more **emphasis on feeding forward** to meet changing expectations over time.[44]
- In the transition phase, mature students are having to negotiate complex issues and may need to **'juggle' different identities**. It's important to ensure they feel part of the institution, plus if institutions acknowledge and help to support the different roles students have this can reduce barriers to engagement.
- The What Works? Retention and success programme concluded that the **academic sphere as key to engendering student identities and a sense of belonging**.[28]
    - Key factors include: **staff/student relationships**; curricular contents and related opportunities; learning and teaching: styles and experiences; assessment and feedback; and **personal tutoring**.
- A **quarter of mature student respondents** to the MillionPlus report said that their overall student experience could be improved by the opportunity to **meet up with other mature students**.[11]
    - Running activities designed to benefit mature students: lunchtime musical performances; tailored events for mature students during Freshers' Week; consulting a mature students' network on cross-campus issues; a mature students forum; and ad hoc consultation (e.g. campaign on provision of childcare.
- Being a student signifies changes in personal circumstances, which affects family and personal relationships, and can mean financial challenges. The **experience can be unsustainable if HEIs don't recognise and mitigate for the stresses** that mature students are under.[45]
- If part-time study is provided at a HEI, ensuring these students are integrated and their student 'identities' are recognised is highlighted as an important theme in the literature.[9]
- The **flexibility** to switch from **full to part time mode of study** were cited as a factor underpinning the success of mature age students in Australia.[46]
- Mature students are more **likely to commute**, and **overall satisfaction in this group is generally poor**, with ~1 in 10 stating they would not have entered HE if they made the decision again. Providing flexibility and concessions for this group is advised and below are some examples:

[43] Chapman, A. (2017) Using the assessment process to overcome Imposter Syndrome in mature students, Journal of Further and Higher Education, 41:2, 112-119, DOI: 10.1080/0309877X.2015.1062851

[44] Tett, L., Hounsell, J., Christie, H., Cree, V. &McCune, V. (2012) "Learning from Feedback? Mature Students' Experiences of Assessment in Higher Education." Research in Post-Compulsory Education 17 (2): 247–260.

[45] Christensen, M., Craft, J.(2021) "Gaining a new sense of me": Mature students experiences of under-graduate nursing education, Nurse Education Today, Volume 96, 2021, 104617, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2020.104617.

[46] Heagney, M., & Benson, R. (2017). How mature-age students succeed in higher education: Implications for institutional support. Journal of Higher Education, Policy and Management, 39(3), 216–234. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2017.1300986

> o 'Sympathetic' timetabling for teaching; remote (electronic) submission of assignments; video conferencing with teaching staff support; lecture capture; remote access to specialist software; car parking; creches; communal kitchens and private lockers, adapting induction; creating online support communities for commuter students; re-thinking the use of their space and improving facilities aimed at commuter students; implementing ride share schemes; and providing co- and extra curricular activities during the day and early evening.[47]

Transitions and Student Experience Recommendations:

- The realities of mature students' lives means that HE is just one part of their responsibility so their transition and student experience is affected by personal factors especially finances, caring responsibilities, work commitments (with potential gendered effects). These are in addition to socio-cultural barriers to returning to education, which are influenced by familial and community orientations towards learning. The sense emerges that without resources and support structures mature students struggle to fit in where structures have been designed with young 'traditional' entrants in mind. There is probably potential for interventions in the early months/years focused on increasing self-esteem through targeted support (e.g. having conversation about past experiences of education as part of an enhanced induction).
- In the induction phase (early weeks) of HE there is a focus on communicating the requirements. Having clarity on for example term dates and exams is important to allow mature students to organise their priorities and set expectations for workload, childcare etc.
- More broadly activities tend to be focused towards promoting socialisation/formation of friendship groups, and clarifying expectations and developing academic confidence, plus developing good relationships with members of staff. There is a suggestion that mature students might miss out on these types of activities because they have other commitments, and that following those who fair to attend up can be important in putting in place mitigating measures (which could include giving individual support through for example mentoring, tutoring). An appropriately timed, relevant induction into the academic culture; identifying a member of the programme team to act as a key contact during the first few weeks; establishment of peer mentors or 'buddies' also stands out as helpful for mature students who enter late to courses (e.g. on articulated degrees).
- Provision of extra support to help mature students cope with the academic demands of higher education study probably need to be integrated into the usual timetable, otherwise mature students tend to struggle to attend. Plus, not all mature students may see the relevance of it for them.
- There has been increasing focus on the importance of 'demystifying' assessment processes, and it is suggested that HEIs could do more to capitalize on early assessment in the initial phase of HE as a learning process for students. Therefore, approaches to developing assessment literacy and giving formative feedback are recommended, especially in the early stages of HE study.

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[47] Maguire, D. & Morris, D. (2018) Homeward Bound: Defining, understanding and aiding 'commuter students' (HEPI Report 114)

- Overall the general literature on retention and success emphasises the importance of engendering feelings of belonging and student identity, which are probably best addressed in the academic sphere, thinking about student-centred learning and teaching approaches and development of good staff/student relationships.
- Studies have shown that mature student clubs and networks (in person and online) can support social integration aspects. Recommendations from policy makers to help mature students to become fully engaged in university life include encouraging them to become student ambassadors.
- There is no one mature student experience, and many factors are likely to make a difference including intersections of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, culture and gender. Many of the recommendations to improve the overall student experience are similar to those in the transition phase: fostering social networks and communication with and between mature-age students; proactive support services and meaningful contact with academic staff.
- Consideration is also needed to development of inclusive teaching and learning approaches, curricula and resources. Various aspects have been highlighted in the literature, ranging from ensuring the programme timetable means provision is accessible by mature students on-course and that alternate options are available through to the development of bespoke alternative forms of provision tailored to mature students' circumstances.
- As well as commitment at institutional level to supporting and involving mature students, research with students themselves highlights the importance of staff having expertise and experience in working with adults – i.e. academic staff need expertise in learning and teaching approaches for non-traditional students and non-academic support staff should be trained in advising and working specifically with the special needs of non-traditional students.

Non-Continuation/Retention

Key themes: Competing demands (some gendered), status and recognition in HE, expectations, motivation and IAG, managing expectations, dealing with financial implications of HE, learner identity and sense of belonging, peer support, 'possible selves' discourse, friendship groups and networks.

- HESA data highlights **non-continuation gap** of about double that of young students.[15]
- There is the potential for **institutional culture to view non-traditional students as a problem** – although this is to ignore the **asset they can be to the institution and student body**.[48,49]
- The two main reasons for dropping out of HE cited by students include the **difficulties of balancing study** with other commitments and **financial problems**.[11,6]
  - o **Financial concerns are particularly relevant to mature students' decision to withdraw.**
- The challenge of coping with the academic requirements whilst balancing family commitments may **disproportionally affect female mature students**.[50]
- Discipline may have an important influence on retention within HEI's – **review culture and practices in departments with higher non-continuation**.[51]
- As a general point – financial challenges as a result of HE **disproportionately affects low income** mature students.
- **Mature students have been found to rely on low-income support services (food banks, breakfast clubs, loan schemes etc.).**[52]
- Mature students who had considered leaving their course reported **lower satisfaction with information provided, lower levels of academic support, lower levels of involvement and higher levels of financial hardship** compared with mature students in general.[47]
  - o Lack of involvement in university life correlates with having considered leaving a course early and less likely to communicate issues prior to withdrawing.
- Pyscho-social factors such as **well-being and self-efficacy** play a role in **supporting retention** and are outlined in the transition section of the review.
- Mature students' learning journeys tend to be non-linear and early withdrawal may not be an end to their HE careers.[13] In light of this, HEI's assessment of what is a 'normal' or 'successful' route through HE is of particular importance when considering their responses to the new Life-long Learning loan due to be implemented.
- **Pre and post entry transition activities support retention and success outcomes**.
  - o Pre-entry interviews might also be a means to identify needs as well as providing advice.

[48] O'Shea, S. (2018). Considering the cultural strengths of older first-generation university students. In A. Bell & L. J. Santamaria (Eds.), Understanding experiences of first generation university students: Culturally responsive and sustaining methodologies. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

[49] O'Shea, S. (2016). Navigating the knowledge sets of older learners: Exploring the capitals of first-in-family mature age students, Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning, 18(3), 34–54.

[50] O'Brien, F., Keogh, B., Neenan, K. (2009) Mature students' experiences of undergraduate nurse education programmes: the Irish experience, Nurse Education Today, 29 (2009), pp. 635-640

[51] Woodfield, R (2014) Undergraduate retention and attainment across the disciplines. HEA.

[52] Christensen, M., Craft, J.(2021) "Gaining a new sense of me": Mature students experiences of under-graduate nursing education, Nurse Education Today, Volume 96, 2021, 104617, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2020.104617.

- **Community based courses** – taking a few classes for a couple of weeks, before they make the commitment of enrolling formally in the course is a fruitful strategy that can give potential participants some time to develop a student identity, and improve completion rates.[18]
- **Personalised initial IAG supports retention** by ensuring that students have realistic expectations and emotional and practical aspects have been considered.
- Multiple examples of institutional **financial support** (e.g. non-repayable, non-means-tested scholarship; annual award linked to progression milestones) highlighted within the literature maybe a good initiative in relation to retention.[47] However, likely to be a range of initiatives that have largest effect on retention, not just financial.[53]

Non-Continuation/Retention Recommendations:

- Interventions in the pre-entry phase support retention by helping to ensure students enter with correct expectations about HE. Tailored IAG is particularly important (but a week spot overall currently).
- Financial concerns are prevalent in mature students' decisions to withdraw, especially where students are studying full-time. Financial support packages probably make a difference to retention in combination with other factors. Promoting the financial support that is available is important, and also making it clear and transparent upfront what the actual costs of studying are going to be. More support with managing finances may be of value, plus there is an argument for 'normalising' the experience of financial struggle (e.g. offering modules on financial management).
- The research suggests that low satisfaction with information provided and lack of academic support can lead to increases in the numbers considering withdrawal. Peer mentoring schemes have been highlighted as a particularly useful approach for both academic and social integration in the first year of HE for vulnerable students. The examples in the literature include web-based as well as traditional mentoring.
- Support and encouragement from tutors is seen to be particularly important in the context of mature student higher education because they tend to lack confidence in their own abilities. This includes giving informal and unsolicited feedback to motivate and encourage students. More could probably be done to build this aspect into tutor CPD.
- Having a 'go to' person also stands out as important when students are struggling, so they can get direct support or signposting to other sources. This person needs to understand the issues mature students are facing.

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[53] Gorard, S., Smith, E., May, H., Thomas, L., Adnett, N. and Slack, K. (2006) Review of widening participation research: addressing the barriers to participation in higher education. A report to HEFCE by the University of York, Higher Education Academy and Institute for Access Studies. Bristol: HEFCE available at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rdreports/2006/rd13_06/

Attainment:

Key themes: Prior education, alternative qualifications, study modes, inter-sectionalities/disadvantage, multiple responsibilities, learner identity, relationships with other students and staff, supporting learning, a HE experience that is relevant to students' interests and future goals, individual attention, consistency of staff and support, enthusiasm and encouragement, learning preferences, inclusive pedagogies/adult learning approaches, assessment and feedback, mentoring.

- **9.6pp gap in attainment** of mature students obtaining 1st or 2.1 degrees when compared to younger students. **This trend is reversed if you look at part-time study (-20.0pp mature vs young).**[54]
- A HEFCE report in 2015, highlighted that when you take into consideration other factors such as entry qualifications, **mature students outperform their younger peers**.[55]
- A key conclusion from the literature is that age and prior attainment are not the main barriers to attainment in higher education facing part-time students and that other barriers play much more of a significant role in the current attainment gap.
- Mature students tend to be **highly motivated** (demonstrated through increased propensity to ask questions, contribute to discussions and make revisions to their work), **greater sense of maturity, life experience, interests and responsibilities, and that they spend more time on academic subject matter**.[42]
- OFFA (2017) recommend institutions develop metrics to capture 'success' for adult learners that are not reliant on the award of a degree (suggestions include **acknowledging the journey** from prior educational qualifications to higher level awards as well as evidence of personal transformation).[16] Other research on the are suggests using a '**distance travelled**' metric to measure mature student success.[14]
- Mature students tend to **learn in a more holistic way**, with a **preference towards more active and deeper learning approaches** – this could **disadvantage them when studying for exam type questions** which were viewed as narrower.[42]
- Teaching and learning in HE stands out as an aspect which can **either disempower or empower students** to succeed. Understanding how mature students experience the curriculum could be a useful first step to developing more empowering pedagogies.[56]
- A scaffold approach (**reflection, emotional conflict, self-assessment, learning rubicon, and behaviour change**) provided an opportunity for mature students to make learning meaningful through topic choice and making disciplinary content as personal as possible, and self-directed learning, allowed them to approach learning in a different more meaningful way.[57]

[54] Insight 2021: Improving opportunity and choice for mature students - https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/19b24842-52a0-41d1-9be2-3286339f8fde/ofs-insight-brief-9-updated-10-may-2022.pdf
[55] HEFCE (2015) Differences in degree outcomes: The effect of subject and student characteristics, Bristol: HEFCE 2015/21.
[56] Willans, J., & Seary, K. (2011). "I Feel like I"m Being Hit from All Directions': Enduring the Bombardment as a Mature-age Learner Returning to Formal Learning. Australian Journal of Adult Learning, 51(1), [119]-142. https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.238739556155203
[57] Chen, J.C. (2014) Teaching nontraditional adult students: adult learning theories in practice, Teaching in Higher Education, 19:4, 406-418, DOI: 10.1080/13562517.2013.860101

- Some authors advocate for a **heutagogical approach** (self-determined learning with a focus on importance of the process of learning as a key skill) for mature learners to take responsibility for decisions on their education i.e. assessment focus, assessments applied to 'work' problems.[58,59]
- **Employment prospects are an important motivator for mature students**, who generally have clear career goals in mind. Careers service tend not to be tailored to mature students and can be difficult to access because of restricted opening hours.[14]
    - Some suggested improvements include better understanding of the skills and professional knowledge that mature students bring, more focus on developing networks and links between mature students and employers and alumni, building professional and career development more overtly into course content, and careers workshops.
- **Support with study skills and IT is suggested**, especially for those out of education a long time but these need to be 'sold' to students who need to see the value to their course.[42,50] Study skills support (e.g. workshops, learning materials or online courses etc) evaluate well as a support mechanism but the issues seems to be getting people to know about/use them.[6]
- Mature students have been found to not engage with institutional support (reasons included lack of confidence to approach staff; lack of awareness of support services; and no time to access them – particularly those that commute) - 'student-centred' approaches and 'embedded' solutions such as facilitating peer interaction and practical learning, offering constant feedback and encouragement, allowing for flexibility, were recommended.[46]

Attainment Recommendations:

- Patterns of mature student attainment are complex and impacted by patterns of previous qualifications and modes of study. A mix of intrinsic factors (life experiences, emotional intelligence, motivation and volition), and extrinsic factors (peer, academic and family support; and learning style, components of the modules and mode of delivery) are also likely to make a difference. Overall the literature stresses the transformatory nature of the HE experience for individuals, and evidences that in general mature students are an asset due to their previous experiences and high levels of motivation and engagement in learning.
- Inclusive and participatory, active approaches to teaching and learning are likely to suit mature learners best especially where teachers promote opportunities to integrate academic learning with their life and work experiences. Curriculum that fosters holistic learning, individual self-direction and autonomy is recommended. Mature learners tend to be less confident about 'narrow' types of learning such as studying for exams. Practices that draw on the knowledge and experience of mature students themselves might also help to validate their sense of participation and belonging in HE. A recommended first step is to use the programme review process to understand how mature students experience the curriculum, and to consider revisions to content and teaching and assessment practices as a result.

[58] Knowles, M.S., Holton, E.F, Swanson, R., & Robinson, P. (2015) The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development, Routledge, ISBN 9780367417659
[59] Kenyon, C., & Hase, S. (2013). Heutagogy fundamentals. In S. Hase & C. Kenyon (Eds.),Self determined learning: Heutagogy in action. London: Bloomsbury.

- Provision of support with study skills is highlighted in the literature (and faculty staff are warned against assuming mature students come to HE as fully formed learners). Interventions such as study skills workshops, learning materials or online courses have evaluated well, so long as they are accessible and mature students know about them, for example by linking them to specific courses. Support services need to think about how to maximise take-up of what's available by tackling barriers related to lack of awareness, low confidence or limitations in the time mature students have for study. Being pro-active about those 'at risk' and offering support is recommended.

Summary:

Fuller et al. (2008) have suggested a three-way classification of barriers: 'dispositional' - that is relating to individual motivation and attitudes to learning; 'situational' such as costs, time, geographical accessibility of the provision, and factors which are relevant to an individual's circumstances; and 'institutional' such as the extent to which the institution is prepared to be flexible with regard to mode of attendance, timetabling, admissions procedures and requirements. These barriers are conceived as material, practical and psychological barriers which are culturally and socially bound. Although this categorisation was developed in relation to participation factors, in reviewing the literature, this categorisation of the barriers and enablers to engaging with mature learners seemed to persist throughout the student life course. Table 1 aims to summarise the emerging findings from the review against the three-way classification described, in order to highlight how different themes are woven throughout different stages, and the commonality of key themes underpinning potential solutions and practices.

- Table 1: Summary of themes

	Barriers to engagement	Enablers to engagement
Situational – taken to mean the practical barriers to engagement	Multiple roles Juggling commitments/competing priorities Time limited Financial burden Distance from HE community	Flexible provision Tailored IAG Application support and financial advice Timely communication in advance Integration of support Dealing with financial implications of HE Consideration to students circumstance and commitments Individual attention, enthusiasm and encouragement
Dispositional – taken to mean the emotional processes involved	Orientation to HE, social networks, cultural capital Poor previous experience of education Low confidence in academic abilities Multiple identities Imposter syndrome Lives in transition Fear of letting people down Aversion to debt Do not see value of HE Learner identity Multiple identities	Peer support Role models Social networks Local community based outreach Local education partnerships Relational dynamics of university Spatial dimension Engendering sense of belonging Mentoring Enhancing motivation and belief Formation of friendship groups/social integration Future orientation Meaningful interaction with staff

		Status and recognition in HE
Institutional – taken to mean the systemic constraints on full participation by mature students	Admissions processes Lack of flexibility Marginalisation Academic challenges Epistemic and pedagogical challenges	Progression routes Recognition of prior experiential learning Flexibility and understanding Pre-entry orientation Transition courses/bridging provision Inclusive pedagogies and assessment Learning support Relevance to interests and future goals Consistency of staff and accessibility of support