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of Exeter

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Mature Access Pathway

Three-year review (2022-2025): summary report

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About the programme

The Mature Access Pathway (MAP) is a bridging programme designed to break down barriers and challenge preconceptions that often deter mature learners from entering higher education. It aims to equip participants with the academic, social, and emotional readiness needed to successfully navigate the transition to university life. Central to the programme is the development of strong, sustained partnerships between universities and further education (FE) colleges.

Led by the University of Exeter, MAP began over three years ago in collaboration with Exeter College. Since then, it has expanded to include Truro and Penwith College, Yeovil College, and, from 2025, City College Plymouth. This growing regional network reflects a shared commitment to widening participation and supporting mature learners in their transition to higher education.

MAP takes a holistic, personalised outreach approach, where participants benefit from a tailored programme of activities including in-college information, advice and guidance sessions, on-campus university days, subject-specific workshops, HE application support, one-to-one admissions advice, and study skills sessions. Participants also receive guidance from peer mentors, current university students who previously took non-traditional routes and share lived experience, advice, and reassurance. The Pathway also assists with Higher Education applications and students who complete the programme will receive a guaranteed contextual level offer from the University of Exeter.

Typically, students on Access to Higher Education courses have not followed a traditional or uninterrupted path through school and are returning to finish their Level 3 qualifications. These courses attract a diverse group of students with a mixed age profile. Many of them also come from backgrounds that are less represented in higher education, for example, they might be the first in their family to go to university, come from low-income households, or have experience of being in care.

The evaluation design

The evaluation was mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative data to provide an assessment of the programme delivery, participants' experiences and outcomes. Evidence was drawn from surveys, interview data, institutional records and recruitment data.

- Pre and post programme surveys (N=70): Surveys were administered to all programme cohorts. They explored programme design and student experiences and outcomes between two time points.
- Telephone interviews (N=3): Programme completers from the 2024/25 cohort were invited to participate in semi-structured telephone interviews. These interviews provided further insight into participants experiences and perceived outcomes, building on the post programme survey results.
- MAP completers at Exeter survey (N=14): A survey was conducted with former MAP participants who had subsequently progressed to study at Exeter. The survey explored reflections of MAP and how it supported their transition into degree programmes at Exeter.
- Institutional data: Recruitment and admissions data was used to monitor the programmes reach, participants characteristics, and rates of progression to higher education.

Research questions included the following:

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1. **Programme reach and engagement:** Who participated in MAP, and what university courses did they apply to?
 2. **Participant outcomes:** What was the impact of MAP on students completing Access to HE courses, in terms of changes in understanding, confidence, attitudes and sense of belonging?
 3. **Long term impact on University of Exeter students:** How did the MAP programme influence current University of Exeter students who completed the programme?

Key findings

Over the three-year period, the Mature Access Pathway engaged 410 students – with many sharing characteristics often underrepresented in higher education. Participants included 69% with a disability or learning difficulty, 55% who were first in their family to attend higher education and 38% from geographical areas of low participation in higher education (POLAR 4 quintiles 1 & 2).

Following the introduction of MAP, applications to the University of Exeter increased across all three partner colleges, with a total rise of 33 applications between 2022 and 2025. However, this did not translate into a comparable increase in firm acceptances, which rose by just one over the same period. In the context of a broader decline in Access to HE enrolments, it is possible that MAP has helped to mitigate what might otherwise have been a reduction in applications and acceptances.

Pre and post programme surveys provide evidence that MAP shifted attitudes of participants, particularly:

- Confidence in managing the HE application process (strongly agree from 16-54%);
- Knowledge of what to expect as a HE student (strongly agree 27-50%);
- Belief in ability to succeed (strongly agree 36-41%).

Key elements contributing to these outcomes included campus visits, opportunities to engage with staff and mentors, peer interaction with other MAP participants, and access to information about university life.

Follow-up surveys of MAP participants who progressed to Exeter showed very high levels of agreement in relation to feeling a sense of belonging in higher education, satisfaction with choosing Exeter, confidence in their academic prospects, and overall enjoyment of university. This suggests that MAP participants go on to have positive experiences during their studies.

However, feedback also highlights that building social belonging and balancing external responsibilities remain ongoing challenges for mature learners. These areas should continue to be prioritised within the programme.

Overall, the feedback is positive and demonstrates that the Mature Access Pathway (MAP) has made measurable progress towards its core objectives, with evidence of positive impact on mature learners' knowledge, confidence, and preparedness for higher education.



Conclusion

The evidence suggests that MAP has improved participants' insight into university processes, confidence in applying, and belief in their ability to succeed in higher education. The programme's most popular parts (campus visits, subject tasters, and peer mentoring) offer tangible, first-hand experiences that address both practical and perceived barriers to progression.

Overall, MAP is an effective and valued intervention that bridges the gap from further education to higher education for participants. Its strengths lie in its relational approach, practical focus, and regional collaboration. Future development should build on these foundations, with greater emphasis on social integration post-transition, subject alignment, and strategies to support learners with complex responsibilities.

MAP has coincided with an increase in applications to the University from partner colleges, though this upward trend has not been observed in firm accepts which remained constant. Further investigation is needed to understand how conversion can be improved.