# Never Too Late To Learn

Mature students in higher education

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## About

This report presents the main findings of joint research by million+ and National Union of Students (NUS) investigating the experiences of people who go to university for the first time later in life.

Million+ is a university think-tank, working to solve complex problems in higher education through research and evidence-based policy.

NUS is a voluntary membership organisation which makes a real difference to the lives of students and its member students' unions. We are a confederation of 600 students' unions, amounting to more than 95 per cent of all higher and further education unions in the UK. Through our member students' unions, we represent the interests of more than seven million students.

# Contents

# Acknowledgements

# Foreword

We are delighted to present this report featuring new in-depth research into the characteristics and experiences of mature students studying first degrees in the UK. The creation of opportunities for those wishing to enter higher education later in life is a unique feature of the UK education system, a feature we must preserve, protect and promote.

Mature students are opportunists in the best sense of the word: taking the opportunity to develop themselves, their careers and those of their families through higher education. Modern universities are at the forefront of mature student education, delivering supportive and engaging learning environments for students of all ages and backgrounds and driving social mobility. Students' unions have a crucial role to play, not just in supporting mature student networks and support systems, but in ensuring that mature students have a genuine voice in shaping their learning experience. Examples of good practice are interspersed throughout this report, demonstrating the diversity of provision and support that is available for mature students.

For mature students higher education represents a fantastic opportunity but can also pose some significant challenges. In this report mature students paint a picture of juggling academic study with paid work, family commitments and financial responsibilities and it is clear that it can be difficult to find ways to finance and complete higher education studies. This report sheds light on the factors that are crucial to improving the experiences and retention of mature students and suggests that 'distance travelled' from pre-entry qualifications to degree attainment should be taken into consideration when individual and institutional achievements are being assessed.

Looking ahead, the new higher education funding regime in England may pose a threat to mature student participation. We have already seen a significant drop in full-time applications via UCAS for 2012–13 amongst mature applicants. This research also shows that as many as 80 per cent of current mature students who entered higher education holding an Access to HE qualification undertook that course when they were over the age of 24; the same is true for over half of those holding other Level 3 qualifications including A-Levels. The withdrawal of direct public funding for Level 3 qualifications from 2013–14 runs the risk of reducing progression into higher education over the longer-term.

We invite Government, universities, higher education institutions, further education colleges, students' union officers and staff to read and reflect on the findings of this research undertaken in collaboration between million+ and NUS. We ask them to join us in celebrating the achievements of an often-overlooked cohort of extraordinary and ambitious students. Last but not least, we invite readers to consider how they can use the information presented here to help to make a real and lasting difference to the quality of the experience of mature students in higher education.

We look forward to taking these recommendations forward.

Professor Patrick McGhee
Chair, million+

Liam Burns
National President, NUS

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Mature Students' Rep, NUS

# The importance of mature students

*"The best thing about doing a degree was the world of opportunities that it opened, not least working with creative and inspiring people."*

# The importance of mature students

Over the past 40 years the higher education sector in the United Kingdom has undergone significant transformation. Framed by the lifelong learning, workforce skills and widening participation agendas and underpinned by the Robbins principle[1] that higher education courses should be available to all those who are qualified and wish to study,[2] one aspect of this transformation has involved the expansion of higher education opportunities beyond the 'traditional' student profile of 18 and 19 year olds with A-Level qualifications.[3]

Mature entry to university has risen – albeit in a non-linear fashion – from approximately 10 per cent of all graduates and diploma holders in 1980[4] to nearly a third of the undergraduate student body today. There were 429,460 mature undergraduates – defined by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) as students who are aged 21 or over on 30 September of the academic year in which they start a degree course[5] – studying for first degrees at UK universities in 2009–10 and these students represented 30.2 per cent of all first-degree undergraduates.

The expansion of opportunities for students who chose to enter higher education later in life has been driven by modern universities that share a real commitment to social mobility and is one of the greatest strengths of the UK higher education system.[6] Yet the presence and importance of mature students is rarely reflected in media reporting, political narratives around social mobility or in government campaigns about the benefits of higher education. This is unfortunate: mature students add richness and depth to the UK student body and mature participation in higher education is vital for individuals, universities and society as a whole.

For individual mature students, going to university for the first time and acquiring a degree can be a way of learning new things, expanding personal horizons, realising true potential, setting a good example to friends and family members, gaining the qualifications needed to change career and increasing future employment opportunities. Mature students are extraordinarily appreciative of the opportunity to go to university and many speak of their pride in "finally" making it and proving to themselves and others that it is possible.

Universities and further education (FE) colleges that offer higher education provision value mature students for the skills, motivations and life experiences that they bring with them. Many mature students have had extensive careers and come to university with transferable experience of planning their time, organising people and projects, working in groups and presenting to audiences. This experience is beneficial for all students and helps to shape the culture of learning at any institution. Public funding for mature students via teaching funding and the Student Loans Company also contributes to institutional revenues.

For society as a whole the teaching and learning that mature students experience and the skills that they develop through higher-level study help produce the highly skilled workforce that the United Kingdom needs to remain competitive in the global economy.[7] As Leitch (2006) reported, 70 per cent of the UK workforce for 2020 is already beyond the age of compulsory education so it is vital that adults have the chance to acquire new skills and progress. Higher education is one route by which this is possible. Mature participation in higher education helps raise aspirations, enhance resilience to economic and industrial change and increase wider levels of progression and social mobility.

Mature undergraduates are not a homogenous group and share much in common with their younger peers. We do not wish to suggest that there is a universal mature student experience, that age is the overriding influence on student life or that there is a binary divide between the experiences of younger and older

undergraduates. Neither are we suggesting that universities and students' unions should necessarily treat mature students differently – the examples of good practice featured in this report are not designed exclusively for mature undergraduates but are available to, and beneficial for, students of all ages.

Yet while mature students, their motivations for study and their experiences at university are diverse, there are some common tendencies that make mature students a worthy subject of research. Compared with young students mature undergraduates are more likely to

study part-time and at modern universities and FE colleges, undertake online and distance courses, study education- and health-related subjects, to be juggling study and family responsibilities, to be from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups, to have known disabilities and to obtain lower degree classifications than their younger peers. They are also less likely to complete their studies. This report explores these issues in more detail, identifying common challenges for mature students and examples of good practice among universities and students' unions.

The million+ and NUS research, which focussed primarily on UK-domiciled mature students undertaking their first undergraduate degree, involved a number of components. These included:

- a review of academic and policy literature relating to mature students:

- analysis of datasets (including a specially commissioned dataset from HESA)[8] relating to mature student characteristics and experiences

- an online survey of current mature students which ran between November and December 2011 and achieved over 4,000 responses, of which 3,963 were valid[9]

- a series of workshops with mature students, university staff and students' union representatives in different parts of the UK held in March and April 2012

Mature participation in higher education is life-enhancing and vital for social mobility, but changes to the higher education funding regime and adult skills policy represent significant risks to future participation. Million+ and NUS have welcomed the extension of fee loans to part-time undergraduates studying at the rate of at least 25 per cent of a full-time degree course as this rectifies a historic imbalance in the provision of financial support for part-time students, the majority of whom are mature. However mature students are also known to be more debt averse[10] and it is not clear whether this will encourage participation or whether the higher overall fee will act as a deterrent. We are also concerned by the decline in mature applications via UCAS for full-time degree courses starting in 2012–13 and believe that the

### Sara Ridley, 44, graduated with a BSc in Engineering from the University of Northampton in 2006

*My parents did not believe in higher education for girls so I left school aged 16 and undertook an engineering technician apprenticeship. I worked for several years then took a twelve-year break to raise my four sons. I wanted to update my skills prior to returning to work and I knew that university was a route to higher skills and better job prospects.*

*The best thing about doing a degree was the world of possibilities that it opened, not least working with creative and inspiring people. It's a big undertaking for someone who has other responsibilities and so working hard is the only way to justify the upheaval that such a decision makes. I think mature student often value their learning time more – certainly on my course the only students who didn't miss any lectures were the mature students.*

*I have benefited enormously from going to university and the experience has helped me to understand my children's needs now that my elder two sons are at university. I am currently working full-time in an engineering role while undertaking PhD research in my professional field. I have also gained Chartered status as an engineer.*

planned withdrawal of direct funding for Level 3 qualifications represents a significant barrier to prospective mature students.

It would be a great pity if those people who missed out on university the first time round were put off from applying in the future. In the context of changes to the higher education funding regime and adult skills policy, this report presents the main findings of joint research undertaken by million+ and NUS investigating mature student pathways to university, experiences at university and how universities and students' unions can best support students who enter university for the first time later in life.

Steve Thornton, 33, graduated with a degree in Media and Communications from Birmingham City University in 2011
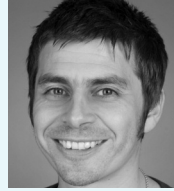
*I left school with one GCSE and settled for working in a hotel. Years went by and I went from job to job – admin, bread factory, data entry, promotions, labourer – before deciding to go back into education and do something I actually wanted to do.*

*I'd wanted a career in the media industry from an early age and after gaining a series of qualifications I enrolled at Birmingham City University (BCU). I chose BCU because I was really impressed with the facilities, the course structure and the lecturers who I had spoken in-depth with on the open day. I'd also met BCU graduates when I was doing a placement at Kerrang Radio before going to university.*

*The course itself was brilliant and the specialism that I graduated in (radio) allowed me to learn so much that I didn't previously know. A personal highlight was being nominated for a Sony Radio award in 2010 alongside fellow BCU student Chris Williams. We were the first undergraduates to be nominated at the awards and to gain that sort recognition from the industry was a great achievement for both of us.*

*Since graduating we have set up our own business – with encouragement and incubation support from BCU. Fourseventy Media is a digital marketing agency that specialises in producing audio slideshows that tell stories about companies, people and communities. We learn more everyday about what it takes to run a business but I'm finally getting that job satisfaction I have always wanted.*

# The characteristics of mature students

*"When I was at school only a few of my classmates were considered suitable to go to university. For me the best thing about going to university now has been feeling intelligent again."*

# The characteristics of mature students

## Key Findings

- There are a number of popular – and false – misconceptions about who mature students are and why they are studying for degrees later in life.

- Mature students are diverse in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, previous qualifications, work experience and motivations and in terms of subject, mode and institution of study but as a cohort they are more likely to have certain characteristics that place them within a framework of social mobility.

- Compared to young students, mature undergraduates are more likely to have non-traditional qualifications, to apply to just one university or FE college, to study part-time, to study particular subjects, to be juggling study and family responsibilities, to be from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups, to have known disabilities and to obtain lower degree classifications.

- Mature students relish the opportunity to go to university and a better understanding of who mature students are and where, how and why they study is essential if we are to ensure that higher education opportunities remain open for people of all ages.

There are more than 429,000 mature undergraduates currently studying for first degrees at UK universities and these students represent nearly a third of all first-degree undergraduates. Rates of mature participation in higher education are therefore much higher than many people realise.

The mature student population is diverse. The term 'mature' covers students ranging from the age of 21 up to pensionable age, all of whom vary in their course and university choices, mode of study, personal and financial circumstances, family and caring responsibilities, previous qualifications and in their motivations for study. At national level very little is known about mature student characteristics or motivations for study. Drawing on specially-commissioned data provided by the Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) and results from the million+ and NUS mature student survey, this chapter explores the profile of mature students.

Mature students also have specific characteristics that place them within a framework of social mobility. They are more likely to be female, BME, to hold non-traditional qualifications and to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds than young students so the demographic profile of this group is one that sits within a narrative of widening participation and fair access. Understanding who mature students are and where, how and why they study is very important if we are to ensure the continuation of higher education opportunities for people past the age of 21 and to realise the promise of social mobility.

## Who are Mature Students?

### Myth: There are hardly any mature students

Mature students range in age from 21 years up to pensionable age: Mature students are defined as aged 21 or over at the point at which they commence their undergraduate studies but the majority are under 30. In 2009–10 nearly two-fifths (39.9 per cent) of mature students were aged between 21 and 24 and a further fifth (19.8) were aged between 25 and 29[11]. There were nonetheless more than 170,840 mature students over the age of 30 who were studying for first degrees at UK universities in the same year so mature students span the broadest possible range of ages.

There are more female than male mature students: A small majority (57.4 per cent) of mature students were female in 2009–10, reflecting historic trends of participation in higher education as well as the higher qualification requirements for professions such as

teaching, nursing and social work that remain attractive for some women who are looking to change career or return to work following a career break. As Figure 1 shows there were more female than male mature students in every age category in 2009–10.

Figure 1: Age and gender profile of mature students in 2009–10. Source: HESA (2009–10)
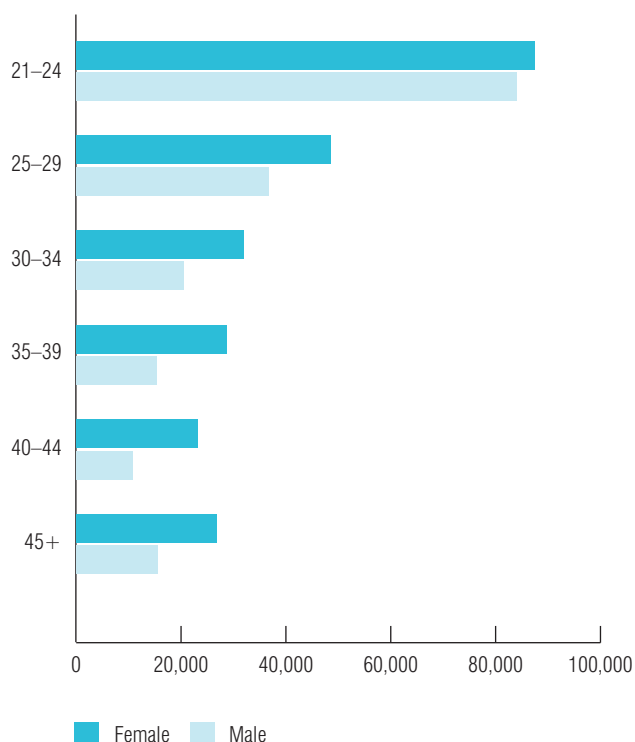


Mature students are more likely to have known disabilities: Reflecting the fact that students with disabilities tend to face greater barriers to accessing higher education and are therefore more likely to go to university as mature students if they participate in higher education[12], mature students are more likely to have known disabilities than younger students. In 2009–10 10.5 per cent of mature students had a known disability compared with 7.8 per cent of young students. Mature students were also much more likely to have unknown disability statuses than younger students. An even greater proportion (20.1 per cent) of survey respondents reported that they had disabilities (N=3,879). This, combined with the fact that the disability statuses of more than 48,000 (11.2 per cent) mature students were not known to HESA in 2009–10, implies that the mature

student disabilities may be underreported and that mature students with disabilities may not be accessing the level and type of support that they need.

Mature students are more likely to be from ethnicity minorities: UK-domiciled mature students are slightly more likely to be from BME backgrounds than their younger counterparts but the difference is relatively small. In 2009–10 23.1 per cent of all UK-domiciled mature students and 20.5 per cent of young students were from BME groups. However there are significant variations in participation by age and by university between different BME groups. Black students tend to go to university later in life than other minority ethnic groups[13] and there were nearly as many mature black students (35,900 or 9.6 per cent of all UK-domiciled mature students) as young black students (36,300 or 4.1 per cent of all UK-domiciled young students) in 2009-10. By contrast Asian students tend to be younger than the minority ethnic average and therefore represented 6.2 per cent of UK-domiciled mature students compared with 10.9 per cent of UK-domiciled young students.

The vast majority of mature undergraduates do not already have degrees: One of the most widespread myths about mature students is that many already have honours degrees. In fact just 45,055 (10 per cent) of the 429,460 mature students studying at UK universities in 2009–10 already had degrees which means the remaining 384,405 mature students were studying for degrees for the very first time.

Mature students are less likely to have traditional qualifications: Mature students are far more likely to apply to university with non-traditional qualifications. In 2009–10 the overwhelming majority (85.8 per cent) of young first degree undergraduates had A-Levels or equivalent qualifications such as SQA Highers, GNVQs and NVQs at Level 3 as their highest pre-entry qualification. As Figure 2 shows, mature students applied to university with a much more diverse set of qualifications. Just a quarter (28.6 per cent) of mature students studying for first degrees in 2009–10 had A-Levels or equivalents as their highest pre-entry qualifications, while 23.4 per cent had HE and

Figure 2: Highest pre-entry qualifications of young and mature students (HESA 2009–10)

| | Young | | Mature | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Postgraduate | 735 | 0.1 | 11,630 | 2.7 | 12,365 | 0.9 |
| PGCE | 65 | 0 | 800 | 0.2 | 865 | 0.1 |
| First degree | 1,660 | 0.2 | 32,625 | 7.6 | 34,290 | 2.4 |
| Other graduate | 3,645 | 0.4 | 14,735 | 3.4 | 18,380 | 1.3 |
| HE credits | 3,270 | 0.3 | 9,590 | 2.2 | 12,860 | 0.9 |
| Other HE and prof | 38,310 | 3.9 | 102,355 | 23.8 | 140,665 | 9.9 |
| GCE A level & equivalent | 851,195 | 85.8 | 122,680 | 28.6 | 973,875 | 68.5 |
| ACCESS courses | 5,040 | 0.5 | 36,520 | 8.5 | 41,565 | 2.9 |
| GCSE & equivalent | 4,850 | 0.5 | 26,595 | 6.2 | 31,445 | 2.2 |
| Other qualifications | 71,990 | 7.3 | 44,295 | 10.3 | 116,285 | 8.2 |
| No formal qualification required/held | 2,835 | 0.3 | 13,905 | 3.2 | 16,740 | 1.2 |
| Not known/ sought | 8,355 | 0.8 | 13,730 | 3.2 | 22,085 | 1.6 |
| Total | 991,955 | 100.0 | 429,460 | 100.0 | 1,421,415 | 100.0 |

professional qualifications, 8.5 per cent had Access to HE Diplomas, 6.2 per cent had GCSE or equivalent qualifications such as O-Levels, SQA O grades and Standard grades, 10.3 per cent had other types of qualification and 3.2 per cent had no formal qualifications.

**Mature students often acquire their highest pre-entry qualification late in life:** The diversity of qualifications held by mature students is highlighted by the million+ and NUS survey. The majority (62.0 per cent) of survey respondents applied to university with Level 3 qualifications but almost as many had Access to HE Diplomas as had A-Level or equivalent qualifications and Access Diplomas were more common than Level 3 NVQ or BTEC qualifications. Among the 2,149 survey respondents who applied to university or college with Level 3 qualifications, nearly two-thirds (65.4 per cent) completed these qualifications when they were aged 24 or over[14]. This is noteworthy in light of the planned

changes to the funding of Level 3 qualifications for adult learners, discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

**Mature applications to university have increased at a higher rate over the past decade:** Echoing wider trends, the number of applications from mature students has increased in absolute terms since 2005 but at a faster rate. Between 2005 and 2010 mature applications increased by 46.7% compared to 28.9% among young applicants. In absolute terms the number of mature students whose applications are accepted has also increased but all universities and FE colleges practice responsible recruitment and are careful to offer places only to those who they believe would benefit from the opportunity to study at a higher level. The applications of mature students are less likely to be successful than those of young applicants and the ratio of applications to acceptances among mature applicants has decreased from 0.66 in 2005 to 0.58 in 2010 as competition for places has increased.

Figure 3: UCAS applications to acceptances ratio for young and mature applicants

|  | Young | | | Mature | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Applications | Acceptances | Ratio | Applications | Acceptances | Ratio |
| 2005 | 386,625 | 316,457 | 0.82 | 135,530 | 88,912 | 0.66 |
| 2006 | 377,333 | 305,121 | 0.81 | 128,971 | 85,769 | 0.67 |
| 2007 | 401,016 | 323,220 | 0.81 | 133,479 | 90,210 | 0.68 |
| 2008 | 432,600 | 350,263 | 0.81 | 156,089 | 106,364 | 0.68 |
| 2009 | 462,376 | 366,486 | 0.79 | 177,484 | 115,368 | 0.65 |
| 2010 | 498,469 | 372,522 | 0.75 | 198,882 | 114,807 | 0.58 |

Figure 4: NS-SEC Socioeconomic classification of young and mature students

|  |  | Young | | Mature | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Higher managerial & professional occupations | 180,855 | 25.5 | 12,535 | 10.6 | 193,390 | 23.4 |
| 2 | Lower managerial & professional occupations | 219,790 | 31 | 31,660 | 26.7 | 251,450 | 30.4 |
| 3 | Intermediate occupations | 96,015 | 13.6 | 22,390 | 18.9 | 118,400 | 24.3 |
| 4 | Small employers & own account workers | 55,290 | 7.8 | 6,565 | 5.5 | 61,855 | 7.5 |
| 5 | Lower supervisory & technical occupations | 34,600 | 4.9 | 4,265 | 3.6 | 38,865 | 4.7 |
| 6 | Semi-routine occupations | 83,725 | 11.8 | 28,785 | 24.3 | 112,510 | 13.6 |
| 7 | Routine occupations | 36,595 | 5.2 | 10,915 | 9.2 | 47,510 | 5.7 |
| 8 | Never worked & long-term | 1,340 | 0.2 | 1,550 | 1.3 | 2,890 | 0.3 |

**Mature students are more likely to be from more disadvantaged backgrounds:** When applying to university via UCAS applicants are asked to give an indication of their socio-economic background. Young applicants are asked to state the occupation of their highest-earning parent or guardian, while those aged over 21 are asked to state their most recent occupation[15]. Mature students are more likely to study part-time and to apply directly to their institutions of choice so the backgrounds of the majority of mature first degree students in 2009–10 were either unclassified or unknown and the two indicators are not directly comparable. Caution should be exercised in interpreting social class data but among students whose backgrounds are known, mature students are less likely to be employed in professional and managerial occupations and more likely be employed in intermediate, semi-routine and routine occupations, compared to the parents of their younger peers.

Mature students tend not to have access to sizable sums of private capital: These findings about relative disadvantage are reinforced by the numbers of survey respondents who reported that they were in receipt of financial support from their institution. Of the 3,469 mature students who responded to the question about how they were funding their studies, by far the largest number were self-funded and from earnings, savings and loans and/or institution-funded, presumably in the latter case through means-tested bursaries. While bursary eligibility varies between institutions, the fact that nearly half of respondents (48.6 per cent) receive some form of institutional support gives some indication of the socio-economic status of our cohort and suggests that this is not a group with significant private capital.

Mature students are rarely employer-funded: Just 5.2 per cent of respondents reported that they had employer funding which seems very low, particularly given that a significant number of the respondent cohort are studying part-time. This is notably different to a 2005-6 survey of 2,654 part-time students for Universities UK and GuildHE in which 27 per cent of respondents stated that employers covered the full cost of their fees[16]. It may be that our data is anomalous or that employer funding has plummeted since 2005 but the implication is that policymakers may be overestimating the levels of employer co-funding that is available.

Mature students are less likely to complete their courses: Mature student non-continuation rates are trending downwards but HESA performance indicators show that mature students are consistently twice as likely as young students to withdraw between the first and second year of study[17]. There are many reasons why students of all ages suspend their studies or drop out of university but this is a serious problem, discussed further in Chapter 3.

Mature students may be less likely to obtain good degrees: In 2009–10 13.6 per cent of mature students graduated with first-class degrees and mature students were slightly more likely than young students (13.2 per cent) to obtain first-class honours. Caution should be exercised in interpreting these statistics as they are based on a single cohort of young and mature students

Figure 5: Non-continuation rates among young and mature students (HESA Performance Indicators)



Non-continuation rates (%)
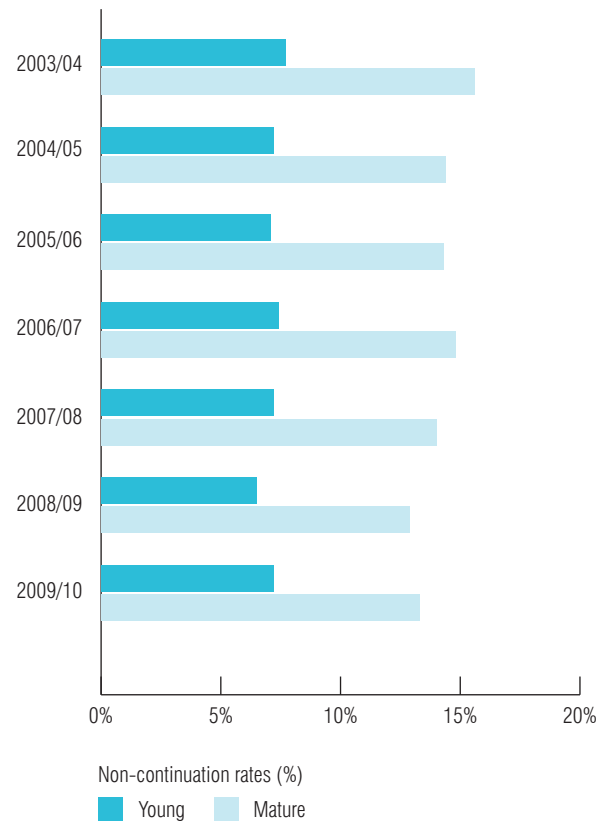
■ Young    ■ Mature

but mature students were less likely to obtain 2:1s and more likely to graduate with third-class and unclassified degrees than young students as shown in Figure 6 (see overleaf). It seems reasonable to assume that variable attainment levels reflect the cumulative array of challenges that mature students can face but there may also be scope for improvement in the extent to which higher education supports the aspirations of mature students.

# Where do Mature Students Study?

## Myth: Mature students only study at the Open University and Birkbeck College

There are mature students at all UK universities: In the public mind mature students are most commonly associated with the Open University and Birkbeck College. A very high proportion of first-degree undergraduates at these institutions are mature and the

Figure 6: Degree classifications of young and mature first degree students graduating in 2009–10

| | Young | | Mature | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| First-class honours | 32,860 | 13.2 | 13,965 | 13.6 | 46,825 | 13.3 |
| Upper second-class honours | 120,135 | 48.4 | 36,810 | 35.9 | 156,945 | 44.7 |
| Lower second-class honours | 68,205 | 27.5 | 28,760 | 28.1 | 96,965 | 27.6 |
| Third class honours/ Pass | 14,615 | 5.9 | 9,835 | 9.6 | 24,455 | 7.0 |
| Unclassified | 12,565 | 5.1 | 12,975 | 12.7 | 25,540 | 7.3 |
| Classification n/a | 35 | 0 | 85 | 0.1 | 120 | 0.0 |
| Total | 248,415 | 100.0 | 102,435 | 100.0 | 350,850 | 100.0 |

Open University in particular plays a key role in creating opportunities for mature students: nearly a quarter (23.1 per cent) of all mature first-degree undergraduates were studying at the Open University in 2009–10. Mature undergraduates are, however, enrolled in significant numbers at universities and FE colleges across the UK. The proportion of first-degree undergraduates who are mature students varies between institutions but there are mature students at every UK university that offers undergraduate degrees and mature students make up at least 10 per cent of the undergraduate body at all but 21 UK universities.

Mature students are more likely to enrol at modern universities: Modern universities have played a key role in broadening the number and range of degree courses that are offered on a part-time basis. At some – mostly modern – universities, mature students comprise the majority of first-degree undergraduates. This is true of the Institute of Education, the University of the Highlands and Islands, London South Bank University, Glyndŵr University, the University of West London, University Campus Suffolk, the University of East London, the University of Bolton, London Metropolitan University, the University of the West of Scotland, the University of Buckingham and Edinburgh Napier University as well as the Open University and Birkbeck College. These universities and the many other

institutions with high proportions of mature students (see Figure 30, Appendix) offer a range of flexible study options to students with non-traditional qualifications, reflecting openness to alternative pathways to higher education, widening participation admission strategies and a real commitment to social mobility.

Course contents, proximity and flexible study options determine where mature students enrol: The three most important factors determining respondents' choices of university or college were the contents of the course the individual wanted to study, the location of the university or college in terms of proximity to where they were living and the availability of flexible study options (see Figure 7). When choosing a university or college mature students evidently balance a clear focus on course content and educational concerns with pragmatic considerations dictated by personal circumstances and geography.

Mature students often apply to only one institution: Since geographical proximity is so important to mature students it is not surprising that mature students tend to apply to fewer institutions than young applicants and are more likely to apply directly to their institution of choice rather than via the UCAS system. Among survey respondents the majority (62.5 per cent) applied to just one university or college (see Figure 8), the average number of applications per respondent was 1.99 and

Nicky West is studying for a BA Hons in Events Management at the University of West London.

*I was a Business Manager within a manufacturing and resale firm but after attending and excelling at two Events Management evening courses, I decided that I wanted to pursue a degree. I wanted to change careers and I knew that jobs at management level within Events required degrees.*

*Going to university has been a life-changing experience for me. I hadn't written an essay for 21 years before I started and acquiring the academic skills for essay writing was challenging but I finally feel that I am starting to fulfil my potential. I have made many new friends and there are many opportunities to network and establish new contacts. I hope to enter the corporate fundraising sector after graduating or continue studying at the University of West London for an MA in Events.*

Figure 7: What were the main reasons for choosing your university or college? (N=3,912)



only 50.3 per cent applied via UCAS (N=3,860).[18] The fact that mature applicants tend to apply to fewer institutions and through different routes to young applicants highlights the need for flexible application routes and for universities and colleges to be receptive to applications from prospective mature undergraduates who may well only apply to one university.

Figure 8: Number of applications by survey respondents (N=3,656)

| Applications | Frequency | All respondents (%) |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2,285 | 62.5 |
| 2 | 351 | 9.6 |
| 3 | 342 | 9.4 |
| 4 | 215 | 5.9 |
| 5 | 419 | 11.5 |
| >5 | 44 | 1.2 |
| Total | 3,656 | 100.0 |

**Mature students tend to rely on institutional sources of information when applying to university:** Given the trend for mature students to apply to a single institution, it is not surprising that mature students tend to access institutional sources of information such as university prospectuses and course and institution websites before applying to university rather than public information sources such as Unistats. Nearly 40 per cent of survey respondents attended an open day and just under 30 per cent spoke to lecturers and/or administrative staff at their institution but very few spoke to current students.

Many mature students do not make use of public information sources: As Figure 10 (see overleaf) shows, UCAS and Direct.gov.uk were the most popular sources of public information but more than a third of respondents did not consult any of the major formal and informal public information sources before applying to their university or college. Mature students who selected 'other' cited individual advisors such as a college tutor, family member or friend and a diverse array of websites including Times Higher, Guardian Education and Mumsnet.

Figure 9: Before you applied to your university or college did you do any of the following? (N=3,877)
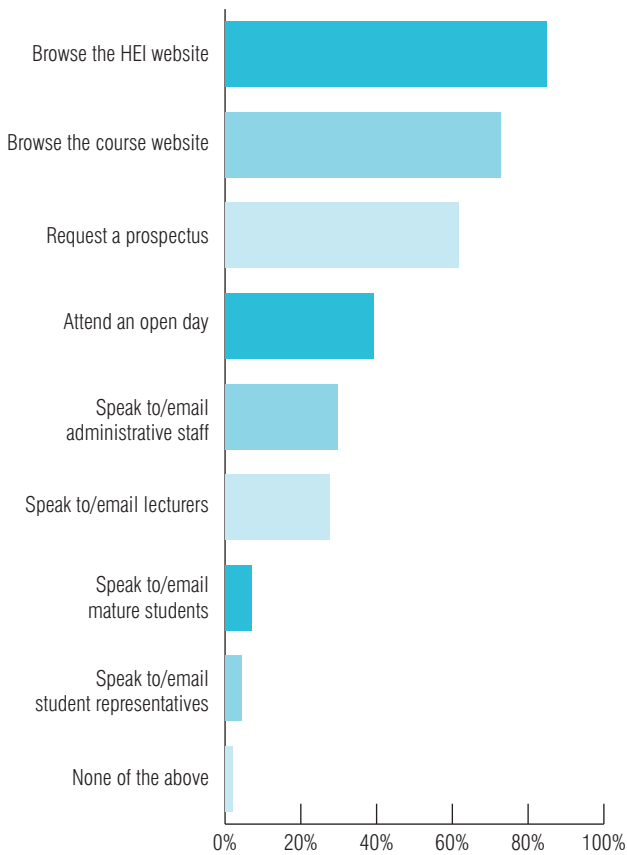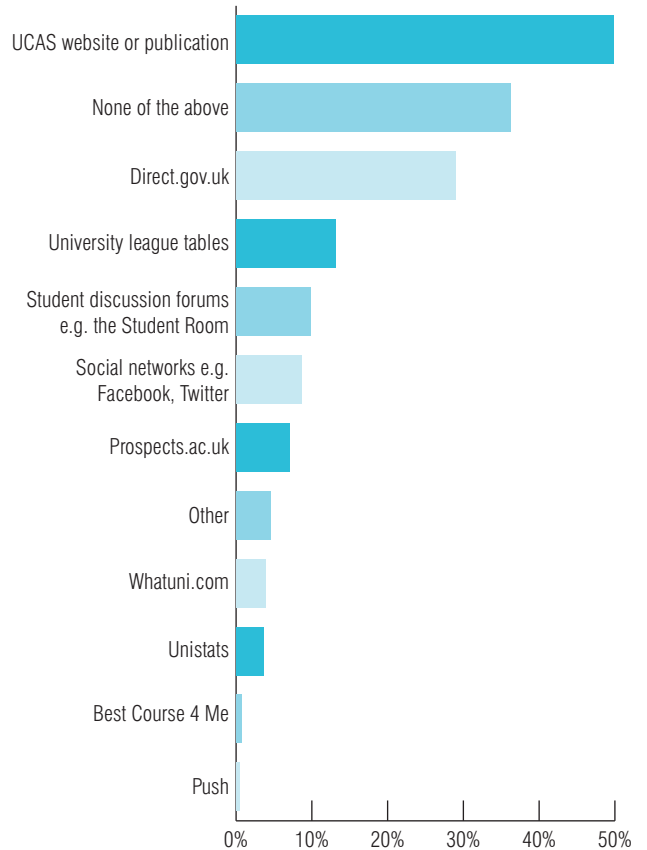


Figure 10: Which public information sources did you consult before applying for your course? (N=3,838)



# How do Mature Students Study?

## Myth: all mature students study part-time

**The majority of part-time students are mature:** The balance of part-time and full-time mature enrolments varies significantly between universities but mature undergraduates are much more likely than their younger counterparts to study on a part-time basis. The overwhelming majority of part-time students at UK universities in 2009–10 were mature students: of the 212,815 first-degree undergraduates studying on a part-time basis at UK universities in 2009–10, 181,885 (85.5 per cent) of these students were mature and 30,930 (14.5 per cent) were young.

The opportunity to study on a part-time basis allows some students who would otherwise not be able to

undertake degree courses to do so: Part-time study appeals to some mature students because it enables them to balance between academic study, financial commitments and other responsibilities such as paid employment and/or family and caring responsibilities. Modern universities have played a key role in broadening the number and range of degree courses that are offered on a part-time basis.

**The majority of mature students study full-time[19]:** The majority (57.6 per cent) of mature undergraduates at UK universities in 2009-10 were enrolled on full-time first-degree courses and this trend was reflected in the million+ and NUS survey where 63.7 per cent of respondents said they were studying on a full-time basis (N=3,885). Mature students represent more than a fifth (20.5 per cent) of all full-time first-degree undergraduates.

**The majority of full-time mature students work and study**: It is important to remember that many of these

full-time mature undergraduates are juggling academic work, paid employment and other responsibilities, just like part-time students. This is clear from the survey results: among the 2,482 survey respondents who study on a full-time basis and answered the question about paid employment 43.2 per cent said they work either part-time alongside studying, with a further 9.7 per cent reporting they work full-time alongside full-time study. For full-time students the most commonly cited reasons for undertaking paid employment were to cover basic living costs (38.4 per cent), to cover indirect course costs such as travel and childcare (23.7 per cent) and to cover direct course costs such as books and equipment (23.7 per cent; N=2,475).

**The majority of part-time students also work and study:** Three quarters (75.1 per cent) of the 1,423 part-time respondents who answered the survey question about work said they had a full-time or part-time job. For part-time students the most common reasons for paid employment were to cover basic living costs (47.5 per cent), a prior decision to combine full-time work and part-time study (45.0 per cent) and to avoid debt (21.6 per cent, N=1,410).

**Mature students are taught in a variety of formats:** HESA does not hold data on mode of course delivery but 67.3 per cent of survey respondents said the majority of the teaching on their course was delivered in person on campus while 31.0 per cent said they were studying mainly online or via distance learning and 1.7 per cent were taught mainly in the workplace (N=3,954). This type of flexibility is also very important to mature students.

Aboyowa Godwin, 31, graduated with BA Hons. in Financial Services from London Metropolitan Business School in 2011

*I was born in the UK but raised in Nigeria and returned to London when I was 23. I worked for HSBC and Natwest for a few years before deciding to enrol full-time at London Metropolitan University.*

*My time at London Met was life-changing, empowering and liberating. With the incredible support and guidance I received from both teaching and non-teaching staff at London Met during my second year, I was able to maintain my A grades while being pregnant and giving birth to my gorgeous son, David. Looking after a baby and studying was extremely difficult but I kept thinking to myself, if I give up on my dream now, how will I be a role model to my son?*

*I found the degree very stretching but it was eye-opening and made me realise there are a lot more opportunities out there than I was previously aware of. In the final year of my course I was offered my current position with Goldman Sachs and I know that I would never have been able to advance in the world of banking without my degree.*

Figure 11: Part-time and full-time enrolments by young and mature students (HESA 2009–10)

| | FT | | PT | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Young | 961,025 | 79.5 | 30,930 | 14.5 | 991,955 | 69.8 |
| Mature | 247,575 | 20.5 | 181,885 | 85.5 | 429,460 | 30.2 |
| Total | 1,208,600 | 100.0 | 212,815 | 100.0 | 1,421,415 | 100.0 |

# What do Mature Students Study?

## Myth: Mature students only study vocational subjects

Mature students are more likely to study vocational subjects: Mature students are much more likely to study subjects allied to medicine than younger students. They are also more likely to study computer science, architecture, building and planning, social studies[20], education-related subjects and combined subjects as shown in Figure 12. But this tendency is not universal, and mature students study the full range of subjects.

### Nichola Lowry, 44, is studying BA Hons Photography at the University of East London

*Now that my children are less dependent upon me I want to return to the world of work but in education rather than the career that I left in 1999. I enrolled on a National Diploma course at Havering College of Further Education in 2009 but was then encouraged to continue on to degree-level by my tutors.*

*When I was at school only a few of my classmates were considered suitable to go to university. For me the best thing about going to university now has been feeling intelligent again and being allowed to indulge my passion for photography and art. Going to university has been one of the biggest financial commitments that I have made and time management is difficult as travel takes between two and threehours of my day.*

*It can be hard to balance study with my commitments as a mother and wife but I feel that my first year was successful. UEL is a comfortable and friendly place to study, and I have been really impressed by our tutors and the visiting lecturers. After graduating I would like to work in a school or college, perhaps as a technician, and eventually undertake a PGCE and teach.*
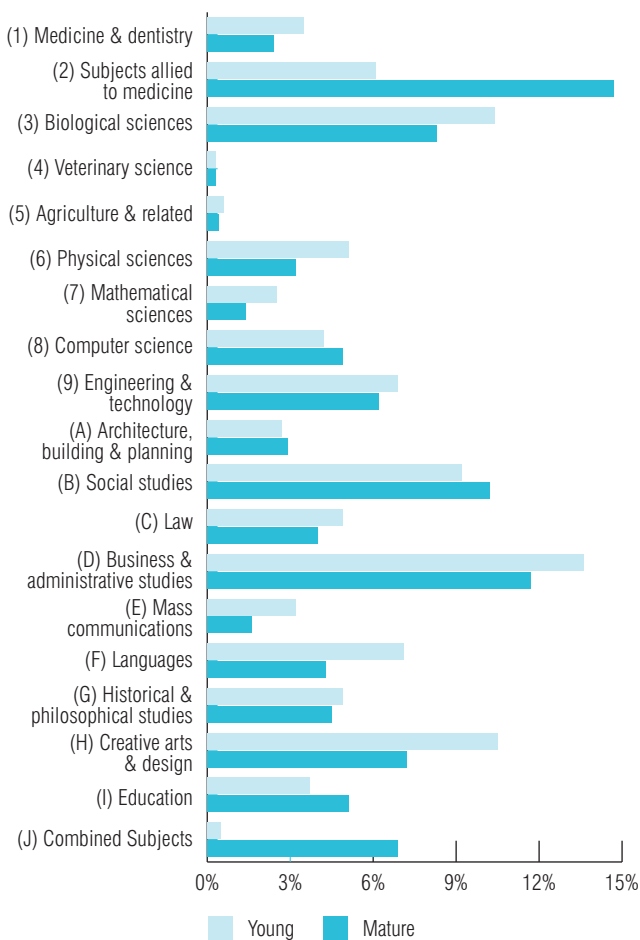
# Why do Mature Students Study?

## Myth: Mature students only go to university to pursue personal interests

Mature students' motivations for going to university or college and pathways towards higher education are diverse: For any mature student, the decision to enter higher education involves a conscious weighing up of the potential benefits and risks, far more so than for the younger student who has always expected to go to university. Regardless of the many different paths trodden and motivations held, the mature students we spoke to in workshops were all deeply appreciative of the opportunity to go to university for the first time to learn new things, master new skills, meet new people and access new opportunities after graduating.

Mature students relish the opportunity to go to university: Some mature students have always wanted to go to university and have the opportunity to critically engage with a subject that they love and be part of an intellectual community. This was the most commonly cited motivation among survey respondents and workshop participants spoke eloquently about how much they appreciated the opportunity to challenge themselves, prove other people wrong and set a good example to friends and family now that personal and financial circumstances allowed.

For mature students a degree can also be a means to an end: For other mature students a degree is more of a means to an end; a way of enhancing employability and skills while studying a subject of interest and acquiring a qualification that enables them to change careers, access employment opportunities that would otherwise remain out of reach and/or improve earnings potential. Employment and career-related motivations featured highly among survey respondents and workshop participants who often said they had clear goals in mind when they first started thinking about going to university.

## Figure 12: Subject choices for mature and young students (HESA 2009–10)



Figure 12: Subject choices for mature and young students (HESA 2009–10)

- (1) Medicine & dentistry
- (2) Subjects allied to medicine
- (3) Biological sciences
- (4) Veterinary science
- (5) Agriculture & related
- (6) Physical sciences
- (7) Mathematical sciences
- (8) Computer science
- (9) Engineering & technology
- (A) Architecture, building & planning
- (B) Social studies
- (C) Law
- (D) Business & administrative studies
- (E) Mass communications
- (F) Languages
- (G) Historical & philosophical studies
- (H) Creative arts & design
- (I) Education
- (J) Combined Subjects

Young ☐  Mature ☐

**Former mature students go on to a diverse range of careers and occupations after graduating:** Just over 100,000 mature students graduated with first degrees in 2009–10 and six months after graduating the majority (52.8 per cent) of mature students[21] who responded to the HESA Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DHLE) survey were in full-time employment. A further 11.3 per cent were in part-time employment so mature graduates were more likely to be in some form of paid employment than young graduates.

**Mature graduates are more likely to be in paid employment but less likely to progress immediately to further study:** Mature graduates were more likely to be combining work and further study than young graduates but considerably less likely to be undertaking further study only. While 17.0 per cent of young graduates were engaged in further study, the equivalent figure for mature

students was just 9.1 per cent, which implies that mature graduates are less likely to progress immediately to postgraduate study. This is likely to reflect personal circumstances, financial considerations and attainment but it does raise some questions about rates of mature student progression within higher education – the number of mature graduates who progress to postgraduate study at a later date is unknown.

### Julia May Carr is studying for a BA in Education Studies at Anglia Ruskin University
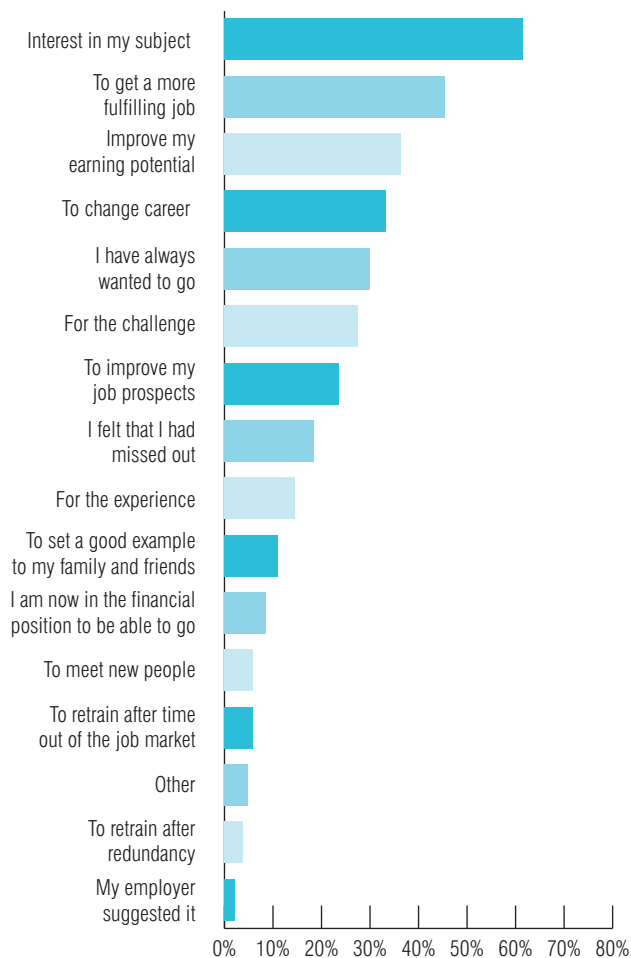
*I left school thinking that I might like to teach but I wasn't sure enough so I worked for a while before going travelling. While travelling I met my husband and somewhere between returning to the UK and raising a family university passed me by!*

*Fast-forward 15 years and I was widowed, living in Spain and raising four children, the youngest of whom, Ryan, has Asperger's syndrome. There was little educational support in rural Spain so I made the decision to move the family back to the UK. Ensuring that Ryan got the educational support to which he was entitled turned into a battle – with the school and me on one side and the local authority on the other. The experience made me want to be involved in education policy, not on an individual school level, but to be able to influence national policy.*

*I completed an Access to HE course which showed me that my brain still worked so I applied for a place on an Education Studies course at Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford. There are times when juggling being a student and being a mum is difficult but I'm really enjoying the course. I am now completing my first year and aim to go on to study for a Masters, then lecture and work in education research.*

## Figure 13: What motivated you to enter higher education? (N=3,499)



Bar chart showing motivations (left axis categories, horizontal axis 0%–80%):
- Interest in my subject
- To get a more fulfilling job
- Improve my earning potential
- To change career
- I have always wanted to go
- For the challenge
- To improve my job prospects
- I felt that I had missed out
- For the experience
- To set a good example to my family and friends
- I am now in the financial position to be able to go
- To meet new people
- To retrain after time out of the job market
- Other
- To retrain after redundancy
- My employer suggested it

Nigel Matthews, 49, is studying for a BA Hons in 3D Design Ceramics at Staffordshire University.

*Education and training have always been important to me and I wanted to go to university now to expand my ceramics knowledge so that I can be taken seriously within the studio pottery world and as a personal challenge before it's too late.*

*I had no idea how I would fit in at university having left school as soon as I could and worked in the construction industry. Being middle aged I expected to be viewed as that "sad old bloke" but I could not have been more wrong. I've stretched myself in ways I could not have imagined before starting this degree and designed and made things I would never have contemplated previously.*

*Overall it has been a challenging three years and not without hiccups but it's an experience I would recommend to anyone who wants to expand their knowledge, no matter what their age.*

## Figure 14: Destinations of young and mature graduates, six months after graduating (HESA DHLE 2009–10)

| | Young | | Mature | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Full-time paid work (inc self-employed) | 89,845 | 48.3 | 26,455 | 52.8 | 116,300 | 49.3 |
| Part-time paid work | 22,445 | 12.1 | 5,675 | 11.3 | 28,120 | 11.9 |
| Voluntary/unpaid work | 4,035 | 2.2 | 805 | 1.6 | 4,840 | 2.1 |
| Work and further study | 13,285 | 7.1 | 5,295 | 10.6 | 18,580 | 7.9 |
| Further study | 31,650 | 17.0 | 4,575 | 9.1 | 36,225 | 15.4 |
| Assumed to be unemployed | 16,265 | 8.8 | 4,350 | 8.7 | 20,615 | 8.7 |
| Not available for employment | 6,270 | 3.4 | 1,990 | 4.0 | 8,260 | 3.5 |
| Other | 2,035 | 1.1 | 950 | 1.9 | 2,985 | 1.3 |
| Total | 185,835 | 100.00 | 50,095 | 100.00 | 235,930 | 100.00 |

# Conclusions

The expansion of opportunities for students who have taken a less direct route to university or college is a unique strength of the UK higher education system. Mature students now form a sizeable proportion of the undergraduate student body and it is vital that mature participation in higher education is recognised, valued and celebrated.

Mature students are diverse but are more likely to have certain characteristics that mean their participation in higher education should be viewed within the context of social mobility. Compared to young students, mature undergraduates are more likely to be female, BME, to hold non-traditional qualifications, to have disabilities, to study part-time and to obtain lower degree classifications. They are also less likely to complete their courses.

Mature students relish the opportunity to go to university and realise their potential and it is important not to overstate these differences: the average mature student is female, white, studies full-time, achieves a second-class degree and is in full-time employment six months after graduating. Yet a better understanding of who mature students are and where, how and why they study is vital if challenges such as retention and degree attainment are to be addressed.

Shirley Mullings, 39, graduated with a BSc in Adult Nursing from London South Bank University in 2011.

*I've always had an interest in biology and for many years I wanted to be a midwife or health visitor, but after leaving school I went straight into work and began a family. It wasn't until after the birth of my third child that I started chatting to the midwife who gave me advice on how to get into nursing. A year later, I went back to college to take my Access to Health Care Science, and the year after that I applied to study nursing.*

*I was nervous before starting but once I got to LSBU and went through the induction I realised I was capable and I relaxed. There are obvious challenges to combining studying at university with family life, even with a very supportive family like mine and supportive teaching staff. It's a complete life change, and it's not easy to find ways to make time for study. I used the bus as my library, writing notes and listening to my Dictaphone on my journey to and from university, and also studied on my laptop in the evening as I waited for my kids during after-school activities.*

*I'm really proud of my achievement. I was awarded Guy's and St Thomas' Student of the Year award during my placement, and after graduating I got a job straight away in their outpatients department. Now I'm specialising in ear, nose and throat and I'm also taking a qualification to mentor other nursing students – I hope I can help and inspire others through their own university journeys.*

# Opportunities and Challenges: Mature Student Experiences of Higher Education

*"I love the whole university experience. It's just so interesting and I just really enjoy it. Who knew I'd go and work in social care and it would be so brilliant?"*

# Opportunities and Challenges: Mature Student Experiences of Higher Education

## Key findings

- Mature students see higher education as a wonderful opportunity, but one that entails a number of challenges including accessing information about higher education, coping with returning to study, integration and involvement, and finance.

- Comparing the profiles of mature students who have considered leaving their course with mature students in general we find much greater difference in the quality of the student experience than in pure demographics.

- Mature students who have considered leaving their course report 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.

- A holistic approach to the mature student experience is likely to be more effective than one-off interventions. Institutions and students' unions are taking steps to improve the experience of mature students and this practice should be more widely shared.

Mature students are diverse and so too are their experiences of higher education. Individual experiences are shaped by personal circumstances, institution and subject of choice and individual aspirations but the overwhelming majority of mature students have a positive experience of higher education.

When asked to characterise their time in higher education 35.0 per cent of survey respondents said they had really enjoyed it, 28.2 per cent said it had been a mostly positive experience, 30.2 per cent described it as challenging but worthwhile and just 6.6 per cent said it had been a real struggle. Students in the workshops spoke with great

Figure 15: Overall, how would you characterise your time on your current course? (N=3,705)
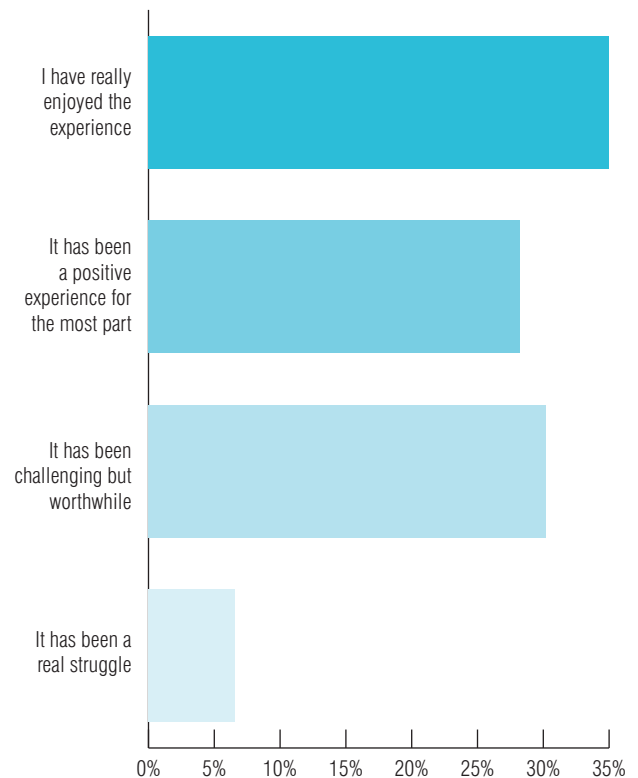


pleasure of the opportunities that going to university has brought. One said, "I love the whole university experience. It's just so interesting and I just really enjoy it, I just love it... Who knew I'd go and work in social care and it would be so brilliant?" Another described the pleasure of going to the library and there being "more books and journals than I could ever imagine".

Yet we also know that mature students are less likely to complete their courses and less likely to obtain good degrees. Through the survey and follow-up workshops some common themes emerged about outreach and recruitment, induction, integration and involvement, financial support and student success, prompting a loose student-lifecycle approach.

When we asked about the specific challenges that mature students face the results were surprisingly consensual as Figure 16 shows. The vast majority – 83.0 per cent – cited balancing study with other commitments in life as the biggest challenge faced by mature students. Finance or funding, and returning to study also posed challenges for a majority of survey respondents.

Figure 16: In your view, what are the issues that are most likely to present a challenge to mature students entering higher education? (N=3,708)
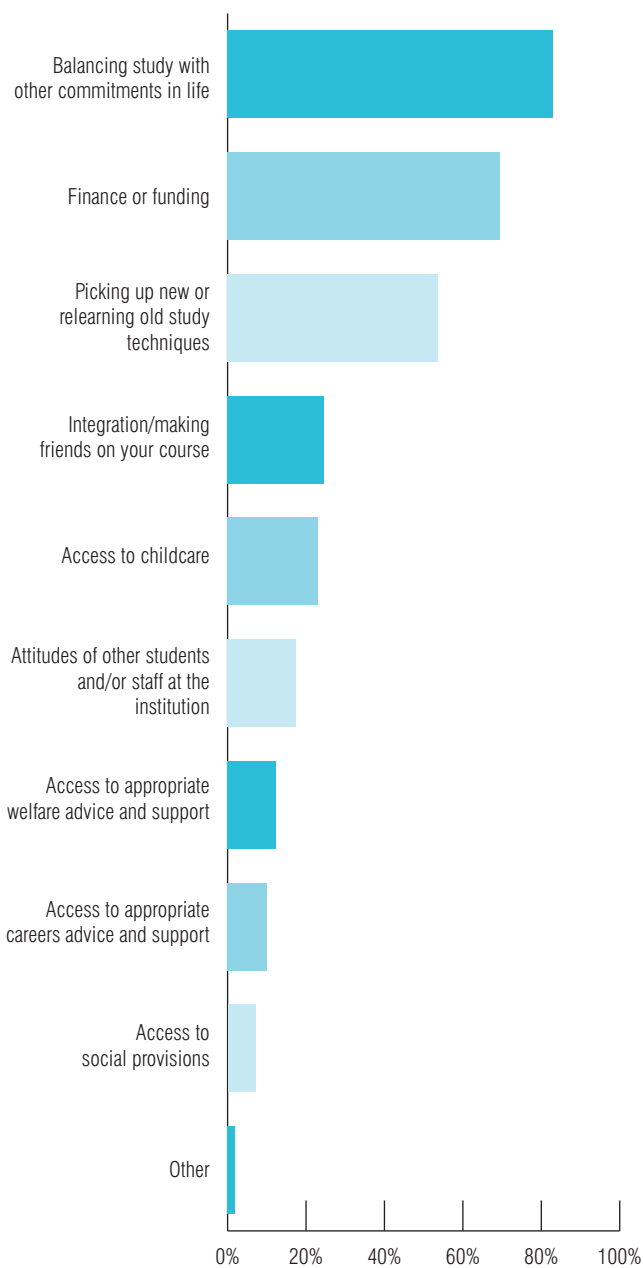


This chapter delves deeper into the experiences and perceptions of mature students with a view to identifying areas of good practice as well as those areas that are most in need of further attention. We use the challenge of mature student retention to frame the issues at hand and find that mature students who consider leaving their courses early do not fit a comfortable demographic profile. The experiences of students who report having considered leaving their course early are contrasted with the whole cohort of survey respondents and found to be consistently less positive across a broad range of areas.

These findings hold out the prospect of making a real difference to the quality of all mature students' higher educational experiences through sharing best practice among higher education institutions and continued local and national engagement with mature students.

# Mature Student Pathways to Higher Education

For mature students, entering higher education is a decision that is not taken lightly. Benefits and risks are weighed and personal and financial costs calculated. Taking a risk on learning makes mature students particularly aware of their circumstances: alongside fears of their age marking them out as different in the classroom are apprehensions of new and unfamiliar learning environments, of financial pressures and of time pressures that might create barriers to success.

A consistent theme is lack of confidence: Most of the students we spoke to said they had deep anxieties about being the oldest or the least intelligent in the classroom before starting their course. They were also anxious about their ability to cope intellectually or emotionally with the challenges of higher education. Some cited people in their lives who would be ready to say "I told you so" if they should fail; others feared letting down the families, friends and employers who had encouraged them to go to university. As current students, many expressed their pleasure in finding that they were able to cope with their course and enjoy studying their subject, even if they had not had positive educational experiences in the past.

## Great Applications Start Here at the University of Cumbria

The University of Cumbria focuses a great deal of recruitment and widening participation work on prospective mature students. On-campus recruitment events are designed to appeal to all types of prospective student and regular tours of the campus are run throughout the year for those who have been unable to attend an open event.

In 2012-13 the University of Cumbria launched 'Great Applications Start Here', a scheme that provides advice and support for those interested in applying to university who do not receive support through school or college. The twilight sessions have workshops on personal statements, student finance and interview techniques as well as expert advice from Admissions and the Learning, Information and Support Service. Next year the University of Cumbria plans to take these sessions out into community settings.

**Mature students are satisfied that they had sufficient information about institution and course choice when applying to university:** This is despite the fact that mature students are not major users of existing public information sources, as Figure 17 (see overleaf) illustrates. It is possible that mature students are less aware of these information sources or it might be because information is targeted at younger learners and in some cases is predicated on choosing from a range of different courses around the country.

**Mature students feel less well-informed about things like workload, teaching and assessment:** The Key Information Set may help to address some of these issues but this gap could also be addressed through institution or course-level information available on university and college websites or through closer contact with institutional staff or students before application. Only 6.9 per cent of survey respondents had spoken to current mature students, missing out on a valuable source of current and relevant information.
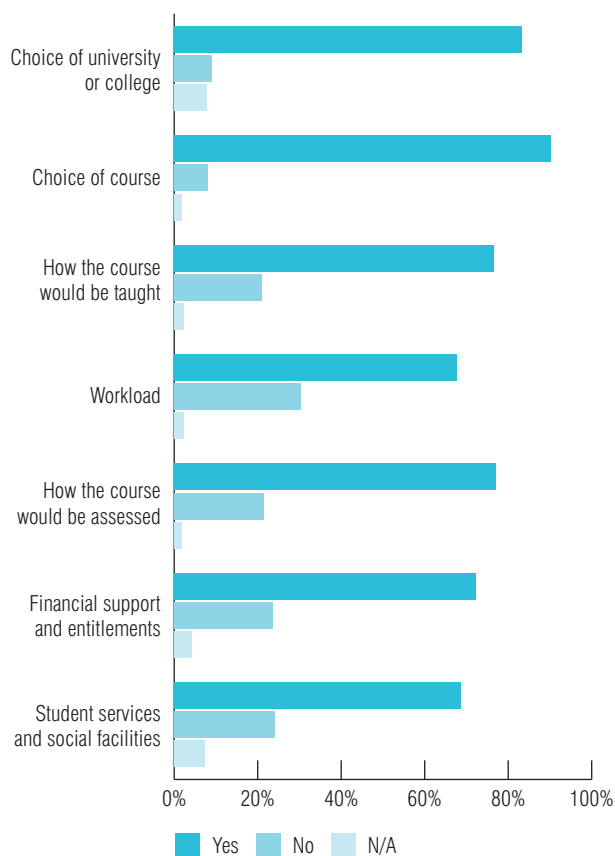
## Step Up to HE Certificate Programme at Staffordshire University

The part-time, flexible-access Step Up to HE programme is targeted at mature students from the most deprived parts of Stoke-on-Trent. It is a free ten-week and 30-module course that runs two days a week from 10am to 3pm. It is designed specifically for individuals who may have been out of education for some time, are currently working and/or have a range of commitments and primarily recruits mature learners.

Teaching and learning focuses on the development of learner self-belief, metacognition and the development of a wide range of academic study skills. The Step Up to HE Programme provides diverse individuals with experience of university study and has demonstrated consistently high completion rates and rates of progression to university courses. Step Up to HE is critical to the decision-making process for the mature learners who attend the course and around 100 former Step Up to HE students are studying at Levels 4-6 at Staffordshire University. There is a strong working relationship with specific awards, with the Faculty of Arts, Media and Design, the Faculty of Health and the Law School all recruiting particularly well from the Step Up to HE programme.

Mature students also reported that they had a number of specific practical concerns about entering higher education before applying: These included fitting study around the rest of their lives, the financial implications of higher education, the impact of their course and studies on their family and integrating successfully on campus.

## Figure 17: Do you feel you had enough information in respect of…? (N=3,872 min)



Choice of university or college / Choice of course / How the course would be taught / Workload / How the course would be assessed / Financial support and entitlements / Student services and social facilities

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

Yes / No / N/A

## Applicant Call-Back Service at the University of Central Lancashire

The University of Central Lancashire runs an Applicant Call Back Service, which provides the opportunity for those who are thinking of applying to study at the university to seek advice and guidance from UCLan's applicant guidance officer before making an application. While this service is available to all ages, it is particularly beneficial to mature students.

Once an application is received, assessment of suitability is carried out on an individual basis at subject level. Work experience and training is taken into consideration (UCLan runs an Accreditation of Prior Learning/Experience scheme which may allow mature students to enter a course with exemptions), candidates are interviewed and they may also be asked to submit a piece of written work. Those who are not yet ready to study at higher education level are given advice and guidance on alternative entry routes.

Mature students who make use of public information are more satisfied that they have had sufficient information in respect of their choice of HEI: By cross-tabulating the levels of satisfaction with information provision in specific areas with the types of information sources consulted (Figure 18) we can obtain an indicative picture of the potential impact of poor access to information. Whereas 83.4 per cent of all respondents say they had enough information to support their choice of institution, the comparative figure for mature students who consulted no public information sources is 74.5 per cent. This effect does not apply when it comes to choice of course. Data on the full range of public information sources is not reportable; only very small numbers reported making use of some of the suggested information sources. Comparison with the most-used sources does, however, tell us something about the value of information compared to no information when it comes to making choices about entering higher education.

## Figure 18: Public information sources against reported having enough information to support choice of HEI (N=3,829)

| Public information source | Number of students who said they consulted this source | Satisfied with information about choice of HEI (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Direct.gov.uk | 997 | 89.8 |
| UCAS | 1722 | 90.1 |
| None | 1034 | 74.5 |
| All respondents | 3829 | 83.4 |

Mature students who have considered leaving their course early are less likely to report that they received enough information: This applies across all the information categories we asked about, including institution and course choice (Figure 19).

Figure 19: Do you feel you had enough information in respect of…? (All respondents N=3,872 min; Early leavers N=786 min)



Legend: All respondents – Yes / Early leavers – Yes
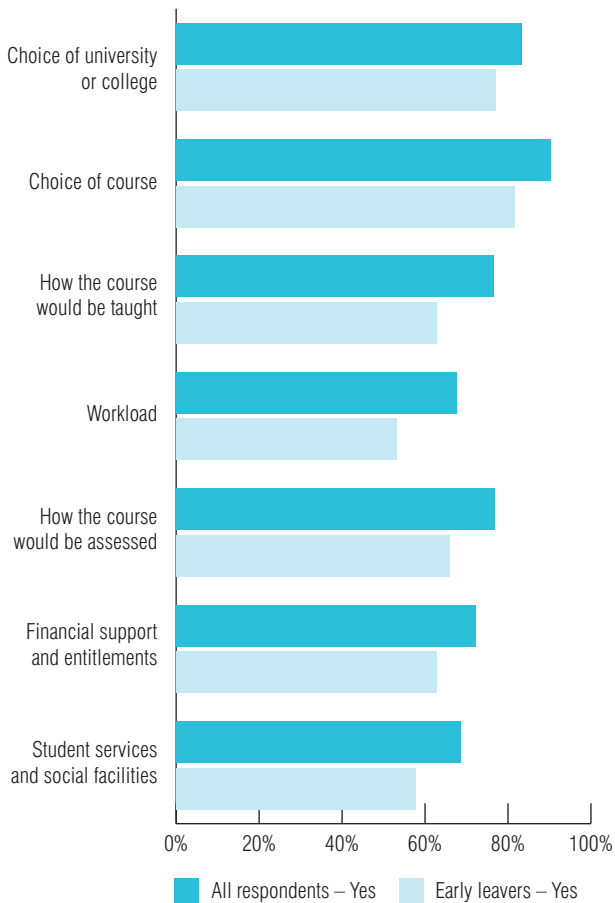
# Induction and On-Course Support

Having applied and been accepted for degree-level study mature students' feelings of anxiety may heighten as the start of term draws near.

**Mature students describe the first day on campus as particularly daunting:** The experience of arriving at university for the first time, enrolling, getting to grips with campus layout and computer systems and

## Pre-Induction at the University of Wolverhampton

For the past two years, the University of Wolverhampton has run a pre-induction session for mature learners one week prior to the start of the normal induction ('Welcome Week'). Mature entrants are invited to join a one-day series of talks and activities that cover enrolment, learning at higher education level, finance and funding, sources of help and a learning centre induction. Induction talks at this event feature successful mature students who share their experiences of adapting to university life.

Wolverhampton introduced the pre-induction session in direct response to the observation that some mature learners lack confidence and were more likely to withdraw from their studies at an early stage. The University of Wolverhampton is committed to improving retention among all categories of student and the pre-induction session has increased in scope and scale over the past two years. A further iteration of this activity will be offered again for new mature entrants in September 2012.

keeping up with the huge volume of information shared in the first week or so was portrayed as overwhelming by mature students in workshops. Some participants felt that mature students may have different or greater anxieties about how they will cope in higher education than younger students and thus find the initial foray onto campus more daunting. Some also found adjusting to new ways of learning very challenging. Having struggled to get to grips with the university system and been overwhelmed by the experience of the first few months, one student reported that she had considered very carefully whether she wished to return after Christmas. Others said that having access to contact details of other students entering the same course via Facebook groups had been a lifeline.

**Returning to learning can be challenging:** When asked about the most challenging aspects of study 53.7 per cent of respondents cited the challenge of picking up

new or relearning old study techniques. Mature students returning to education after a long time away may take longer to adjust to learning and to master the standards and practices required in an unfamiliar academic culture. Formal development of metacognitive skills has been of value in some institutions; in others, we expect, this is built informally into course delivery.

**Study skills workshops and learning materials are rated highly by mature students who have made use of them:** Study skills provision was almost universally experienced as positive and was described as 'a lifeline' by mature students who had tracked down the relevant workshops or online courses. However many mature students were not aware of this provision (41.1 per cent of survey respondents said they had not been offered study skills support) and it was agreed by workshop participants that study skills resources could be better publicised, for example, through closer links to specific courses.

**Students who say they have considered leaving their course are less likely to report that they have been**

## Study Skills at the University of Bedfordshire

Students at the Faculty of Health and Social Sciences at the University of Bedfordshire have personal tutor support, practice teacher support and support from a wide range of facilities in the wider university such as Professional Academic Development (PAD) workshops and study skills.

The Faculty of Health and Social Sciences organises and delivers a university-wide system of support called Communication Skills. The programme discusses the culture of the modern British university, the necessary study skills for excellence and the best communication styles in speech and writing. This enables students from different backgrounds to engage more effectively with their subject matter, their tutors and their classmates.

**offered support:** As Figure 20 shows there is a lot of variation in the forms of provision that mature students reported they had been offered as part of induction processes or subsequent follow-up. While the differences between all respondents and early leavers are not extensive, the fact that early leavers consistently report lower levels of provision should give pause for thought, particularly the differences between those who say they have been offered student support groups and those who say they have not.

Figure 20: Differences in reported support offered between all respondents and prospective early leavers (All respondents N=3,506 min; Early leavers N=752 min)
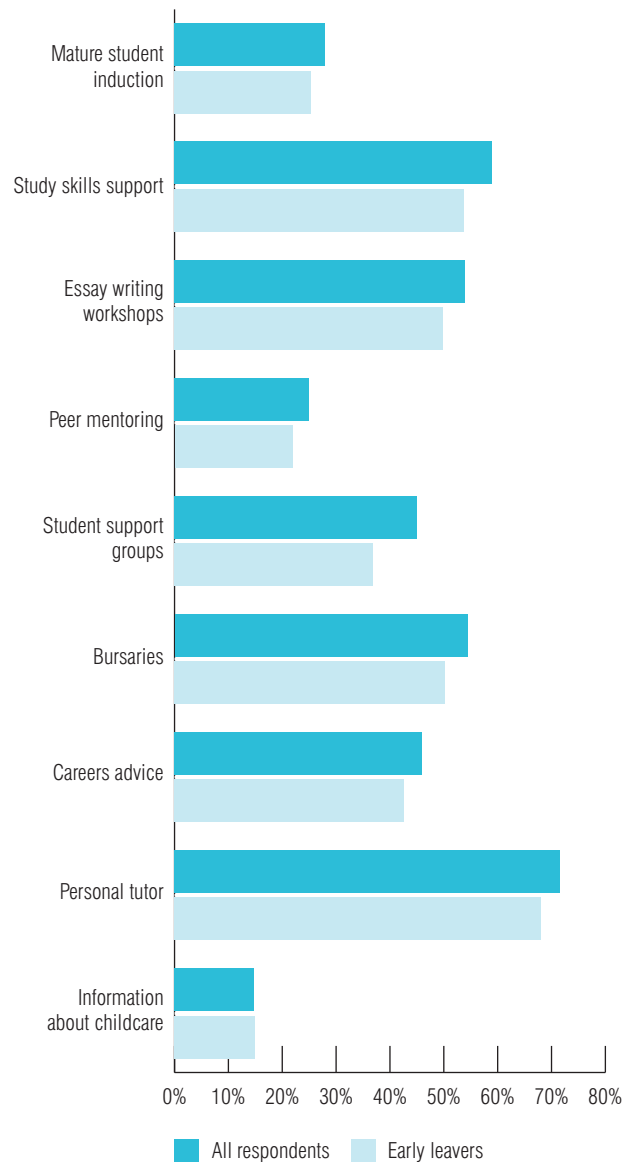
## Love Your Mind Programme at the University of Derby

The Love Your Mind programme at the University of Derby is designed to help students develop their skills and enhance their academic performance. This is especially important for mature students who are returning to study and who are often juggling competing roles.

Extensive research has identified the key issues that impact social and academic integration, academic performance and future employability as presentation anxiety, exam anxiety, sleep disturbance, physical and emotional health, academic confidence and communication skills. The Love Your Mind Programme is offered to all students via workshops, web resources, a series of posters and booklets and a bibliotherapy service. It delivers awareness-raising events, activities and interventions that highlight the importance of well-being, emotional intelligence and motivation for academic success and future employability.

On some programmes Love Your Mind activities are delivered in line with specific need. For example Overcoming Presentation Anxiety was delivered to 193 Access to HE students as this was identified as a primary reason for students not completing or progressing from the Access programme. Among these 193 attendees, 72.5 per cent reported increased confidence in their ability to deliver a good presentation and 93 per cent indicated that they better understood how to overcome presentation anxiety.

**Mature students welcome the diversity of age and experience among fellow students but sometimes find learning alongside younger students frustrating:** Some workshop participants felt younger students did not take the course as seriously as mature students did, citing issues such as noise and disturbances in lectures. One survey respondent who had considered leaving their course even cited the behaviour of younger students as a reason. Some mature students believe that lecturers unreasonably expect them to take responsibility for managing the productivity of younger students, when in fact the social mores prevailing between students make this very awkward. Mature students agreed that lecturers could do more to manage interactions between students, particularly in the group work context.

**Group work can pose particular difficulties for mature students:** Some mature students felt they had to carry the workload of other group members or risk being marked down. Mature students recognise the value of group work and its professional applications but suggested that more time could be invested in setting expectations and exploring with students how to get the most out of group work, particularly in light of the different schedules and commitments of group members. Mature students also suggested that it should be possible to obtain an individual mark for a group assessment.

**Mature students would welcome early provision of timetables and course materials:** Mature students juggling study with home life, work and dependents said they were often given timetables, module reading lists and placement information at very short notice and, in some cases, even term dates were hard to find. Lack of advance warning about scheduled classes presents difficulties in relation to childcare, work and travel arrangements and early provision of course materials is useful for students who wish to undertake initial reading. Mature students said they did not expect a great deal of detail far in advance, but would appreciate knowing, for example, which days of the week classes were to be scheduled. Given that 83 per cent of survey respondents cited balancing study with other commitments as the biggest challenge facing mature students, early provision of key information has the potential to make a significant improvement to the mature student experience.

**Mature students with childcare responsibilities highlighted the difficulties of attending classes during schools' half term:** 43.0 per cent of survey respondents had caring responsibilities and in workshops a number of mature students highlighted particular difficulties

The University of Sunderland's Marketing & Recruitment Department conducts a range of surveys with current students across the year. This includes new student surveys, student experience surveys and participation in national research such as the National Student Survey. Wherever feasible the data is analysed by different demographic groups, including by age, in order to identify major differences.

Over the years understanding of the specific needs of mature students has increased significantly and mature student-friendly hours have been adopted in some programmes to enable those with varying commitments eg those reliant on childcare to start later or leave earlier. In other programmes lectures and taught sessions are block-timetabled into two or three longer days rather than spread across the whole week. Block timetabling is not specifically targeted at mature students but it does help those who are juggling responsibilities outside of their study.

during schools' half term, particularly where university campuses were not child-friendly. There is a case for pausing teaching or scheduling a reading week during schools' half term, a move that would benefit lecturers as well as students with dependents.

# Integration and Involvement

One of the core themes of the research was the extent to which mature students feel integrated into university life and able to engage with the wider staff and student bodies. We found that the experience in this respect was highly variable. Students' unions have an important role to play in supporting mature student integration on campus. It is increasingly recognised that traditional structures tend to work in favour of traditional students, and students' unions are working to break down barriers to mature student involvement, whether through carrying out research, supporting informal and formal

networks or encouraging participation in formal representation structures.

Most of our workshop participants felt that their institutions had a solid system for gathering student feedback in place although implementation could be variable: Some mature students had approached their tutors directly to discuss specific course issues, although willingness of tutors to discuss the course with mature students varied. Some cited institutional or national student experience surveys and module feedback systems. Course rep systems were thought to be valuable in principle, but did not always work as well as they could.

Mature students have access to social support networks: Some were engaged in mature student networks, and many felt comfortable that they had made friends and had a network of peer support to draw on, usually involving course mates.

Mature students also said that there was limited provision for mature students to engage socially: Workshop participants felt that student activities arranged by or in partnership with the students' union tended to be targeted at younger students and some said that the students' union could be intimidating. There was a lot of debate as to whether mature students have the time and/or inclination to engage with on-campus social activities, given existing time pressures. While some students felt that extra provision would be a waste of time, others felt it would be highly valuable.

Among mature students levels of involvement in university life correlate with having considered leaving a course early: The differences in feelings of involvement between the whole survey cohort and mature students who have considered leaving early are stark (see Figures 21 and 22). It is widely known that those students who do not feel part of a community are more likely to leave early (and less likely to tell anyone about the problems that are making them want to leave). The challenge for institutions, students' unions and mature students is to develop feelings of involvement in a mass higher education context with students whose lives do not revolve around study.

Figure 21: How involved in university/college life do you feel? (All respondents N=3,717; Early leavers N=786)



Ken Harris, 36, graduated with a BA Hons degree in Deaf Studies from the University of Wolverhampton and is now undertaking an MA in Conflict Studies

*I got involved with the students' union at the University of Wolverhampton within the first few weeks of starting university. I started off as a course rep and later became a school rep and I also started a capoeira society which I ran for three years. This engagement helped to form friendships and social relationships that I feel definitely helped my overall experience.*

*The students' union also gave me opportunities for volunteering and I gained employment as a receptionist, providing me with an extra income and giving me extra employability skills. My overall experience was completed with me successfully becoming the President of the students' union for two consecutive years. This role has given me a wealth of knowledge and experience and has ultimately helped to shape my future career prospects.*

*I would recommend that every student take advantage of the services of their students' union, whether that be for guidance, advice, employability or social activities and interactions.*
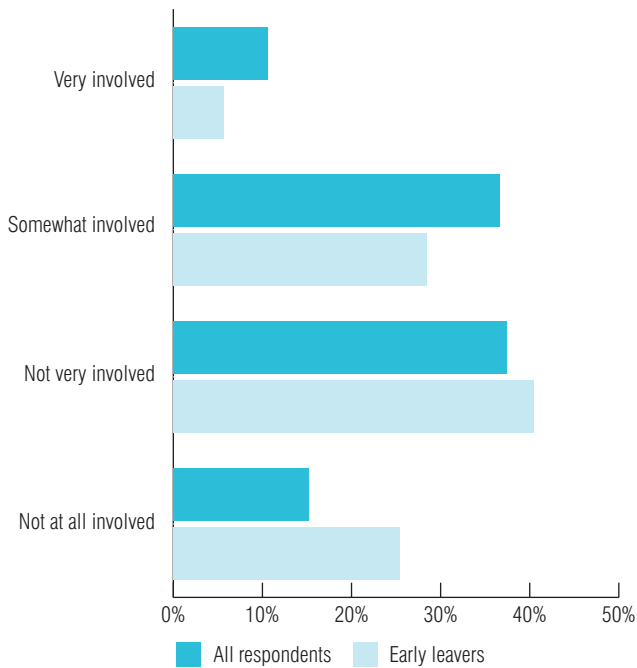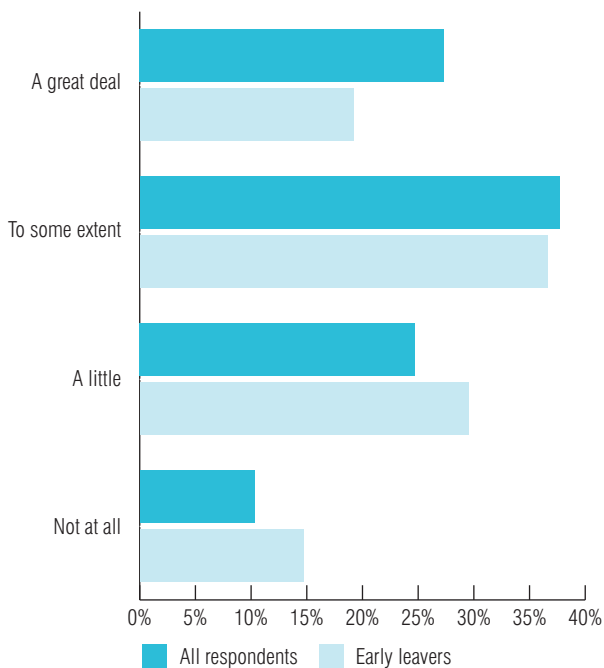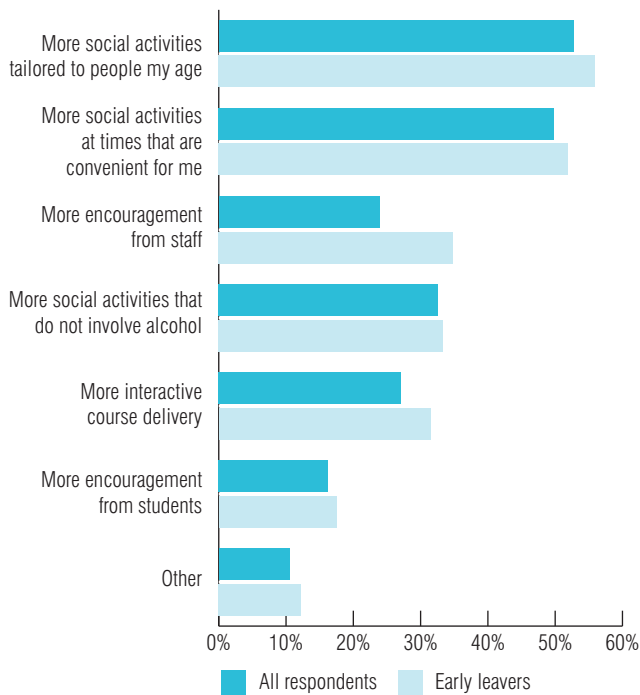
Figure 22: To what extent, if at all, do you feel that you have been able to develop friendships and positive relationships with other students and staff at your institution? (All respondents N=3,721; Early leavers N=790)



Mature students would find it easier to get involved in university life if there were more activities that were tailored towards mature students and more social activities at times that that were convenient: This is shown in Figure 23 (see overleaf). Investigating the responses of those who selected 'other' some observed that they were distance learners so involvement was irrelevant. Others said that they lived too far away from campus or had too many other commitments for involvement to be straightforward for them. Still others said that they could not afford to participate in activities. Concrete suggestions included provision of more social space, fitness facilities, more use of social media and child-friendly activities.

Figure 23: What would make it easier to get involved? (All respondents N=3,267; Early leavers N=724)



Legend: ■ All respondents  □ Early leavers

Bar chart categories (top to bottom):
- More social activities tailored to people my age
- More social activities at times that are convenient for me
- More encouragement from staff
- More social activities that do not involve alcohol
- More interactive course delivery
- More encouragement from students
- Other

X-axis: 0% to 60% (10% increments)

## Students' unions supporting mature students: Bucks New and UWE

Bucks Students' Union has published a benefit statement for mature students in 2011–12, including a campaign on provision of childcare led by the Vice-President Education and Welfare, a campaign to remove exams from half term weeks, a student-led mature students' society and a Mature Student Breakfast Club. The student advice centre and recreational activities led by the union are also considered to be among the ways that mature students can benefit from engagement with the students' union.

The University of the West of England Students' Union has just started its first mature student network. Ideas currently in train for developing the network include a mature student one-day summer school to support induction, tailored events for mature students during Freshers' Week and a mature student network stall at Freshers' Fair.

## Students' unions supporting mature students: Roehampton and York

Roehampton Students' Union offers a 'live lunch' where musical acts that would normally play in the evening give a set over lunchtime, which is more convenient for mature students and ensures a vibrant atmosphere in the lunch hour.

York University Students' Union has found that mature student course reps are very valuable in ensuring a broad range of feedback. York SU also ensures that any survey carried out includes data capture about age, so that it is clear where specific issues affect mature students in particular. York also has a mature students' network supporting the mature student community, which the union engages with on issues raised by the network and consults with on cross-campus issues.

Teaching and support staff also have a key role to play in mature student engagement and involvement: When considering feelings of involvement it might be tempting to focus solely on student networks and activities at the expense of teaching and support staff who are also important influences. Figure 23 shows that early leavers, more so than the generality of mature students, cite 'encouragement from staff' as a factor in feeling involved, whereas 'encouragement from students' features relatively low for both cohorts. Mature students felt that staff should recognise their age and experience and not treat them "like a child". Some mature students said that lecturers' implicit assumptions of prior knowledge of the subject made study particularly challenging and others that they felt staff should recognise the pressures they experience as mature students and be more flexible to their circumstances. One student said, "They told us when we arrived that the average student here was 35, female and had caring responsibilities, but you wouldn't know it in the way the course is organised". One institution whose students we spoke to had actually banned children from campus altogether, surely a guaranteed way to ensure a large proportion of mature students feel excluded.

Figure 24: To what extent, if at all, do you feel that staff are understanding of your circumstances as a mature student? (All respondents N=3,582; Early leavers N=753)



All respondents    Early leavers
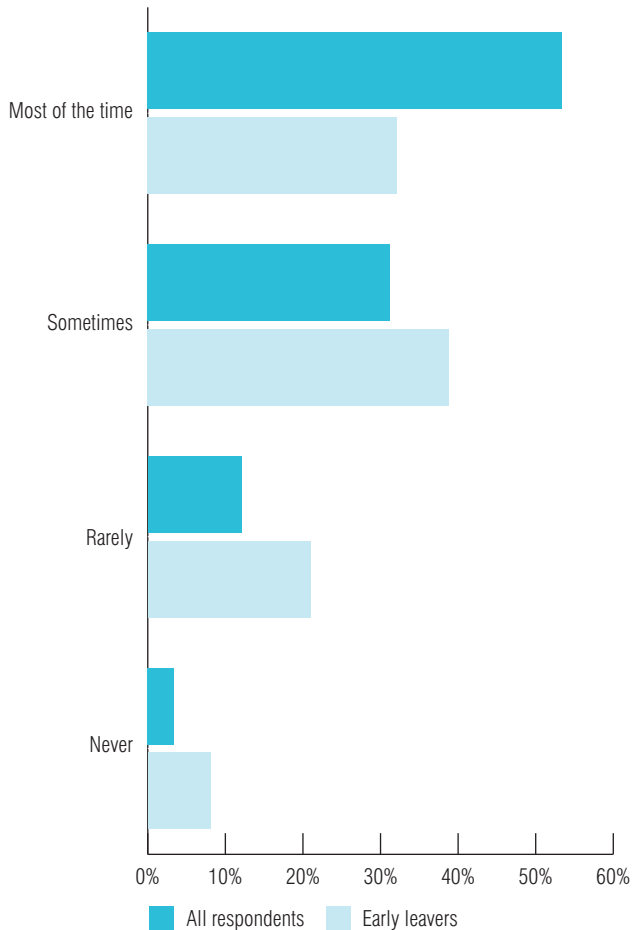
# Financial Support

Higher education requires a financial investment above and beyond the headline fee. Mature students may be slightly more likely to have savings or be in employment than younger students but they are less likely to have a parental 'failsafe' option and more likely to have caring responsibilities and financial commitments. As such, finance looms large in the experience of the mature student respondents to the survey and 69.4 per cent of survey respondents said that finance was one of the biggest challenges experienced by mature students in higher education. Half of respondents reported receiving financial support from their institution, suggesting that mature students have limited access to capital to support their study.

## Students' unions supporting mature students: Anglia Ruskin, Cardiff and Kingston

Anglia Ruskin Students' Union has a 'students with children' society, which works with a number of mature students. The students' union also runs 'give it a go' events and trips which are designed to be family-friendly. Activities like Love Food Hate Waste, Santa's Grotto and the Olympic-themed 'Be a Champion' event are promoted through the on-campus creche. There are many active mature student course reps, and the students' union holds a rep conference to enable reps to question staff at the university about their experience.

Cardiff University Students' Union has created a mature students' association and initiated a series of informal afternoon wine and pizza get-togethers for its membership. Due to the success of this inititaive Cardiff SU are considering introducing an 'ideas café' where mature students can brainstorm how their university experience can improve.

Kingston University hold a mature students' forum once per semester to gather mature student feedback on their experience; the students' union runs a series of social activities throughout the semester including lunches, visits to the pub and meals in the evening.

A significant proportion of mature students appear to struggle to make ends meet while studying: We asked mature students about their financial circumstances, including how they were funding their course, whether they had sought financial advice or discretionary funding, whether they were in debt, and whether they had experienced financial hardship. Among survey respondents 26.9 per cent had applied for discretionary funding (N=3,494); 29.7 per cent had sought financial advice from student services or their students' union (N=3,490); 25.8 per cent had taken on commercial debt beyond their student loan because their expenses exceeded their income and 15.1 per cent had become

indebted to a family member (N=3,456). When asked specifically whether they or their household had encountered financial hardship as a result of their study, 25.5 per cent of respondents said they had, and a further 37.2 per cent said that they had encountered financial hardship to some extent (N=3,472). This means that over two-thirds of mature student respondents have had financial issues to contend with alongside studying.

**Mature students who suffer financial hardship are more likely to study full-time, have caring responsibilities and more likely to have a disability:** These students are also somewhat more likely to rent, rather than own, their home, to live locally to their institution and to have entered higher education via an Access to HE course. A picture builds up of financial hardship being suffered by students who have less stable financial circumstances, who are vulnerable or have dependents, and for whom the local provision of higher education opportunities may be something of a lifeline. However, the differences are small, so we should be wary of over-emphasising these findings.

**Financial hardship is closely linked to retention:** Alongside access to information and involvement in university life financial hardship is a key predictor of mature student retention. Students who report financial hardship are more likely to report that they have considered leaving their course (32.5 per cent) or suspending (47.3 per cent) their studies, compared with all survey respondents. Among early leavers 56.6 per cent report that more financial support would most improve their experience as a mature student (N=767), over and above flexible deadlines (50.8 per cent), more academic support (41.9 per cent) and early provision of timetables (39.5 per cent).

**More openness about financial struggles and more support with managing finances may be of value for mature students:** A student advisor we spoke to said that for mature students, admitting to being in financial difficulties can be problematic, with potential implications of not being able to manage, or letting down the family. Removing any prospective shame around seeking advice through normalising the experience of financial struggle – building finance into induction, offering modules on financial management and/or drop-in sessions, and inviting current students to share how they manage their finances – may be of value.

Figure 25: profile of mature students suffering financial hardship against all respondents (All respondents N=3,480 min; Financial hardship N=881 min)

| | | All respondents (%) | Financial hardship (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Demographics | Studying full-time | 63.7 | 78.9 |
| | Has caring responsibilities | 43.0 | 51.0 |
| | Has a disability | 20.1 | 24.3 |
| Qualification profile | A-levels/Highers | 21.8 | 18.8 |
| | Vocational qualification | 18.3 | 18.6 |
| | Access to HE | 21.1 | 27.3 |
| Living arrangements | Homeowner | 37.7 | 32.6 |
| | Renting from a private landlord | 31.1 | 38.6 |
| | Live locally to institution | 50.5 | 54.1 |

Figure 26: Considering leaving or suspending their course: all respondents against those suffering financial hardship (All respondents N=3,694 min; Financial hardship N=870 min)



Considered suspending their course
Considered leaving their course

0%  10%  20%  30%  40%  50%

■ All respondents  ■ Financial hardship

## Aspire Scholarship Scheme at Anglia Ruskin University

As part of a university-wide commitment to encourage progression and to reward success, Anglia Ruskin University provides a non-repayable, non-means-tested scholarship to full-time UK and EU undergraduate students on HEFCE-fundable courses.

An award of £500 a year is automatically paid to eligible students via the Anglia Ruskin Aspire Card, subject to successful progression from the first semester into the second semester and the completion of an attendance task in Semester 2. Once money is loaded onto a student's Aspire Card the scholarship funds can be spent on books, stationary, laptops, computer consumables and other learning materials from John Smith's bookshops.

Ensuring that costs associated with specific courses are published and/or built into the headline fee is important: Access to finance inevitably shapes student involvement in university life. One mature student we spoke to said that high on-campus parking charges stopped him from staying beyond his allocated teaching time and others said there were few places on campus to sit that didn't imply at least the purchase of a beverage. Among survey respondents who work, 31.8 per cent said they did so in order to cover direct course costs. For mature students who are experiencing financial difficulties these additional costs and unexpected course costs such as textbooks, printing and field trips can be particularly challenging so it is vital that universities and colleges ensure that course costs are either published or, as in the case of Coventry University from 2012–13, are built into the headline fee[22].

# Retention and Attainment

Propensity to leave one's course and not return can be read as the extreme end of a pattern of specific challenge across the various aspects of the mature student experience. Throughout this chapter the experience of the whole cohort of mature survey respondents has been compared to the responses of mature student who have considered leaving their course. We have found that mature students who report that they have considered leaving are also more likely to report less access to information, lower levels of involvement and higher levels of financial hardship. We also asked survey respondents whether they had considered suspending their course for a fixed period of time, and found that the situation of prospective leavers is broadly similar to those who have considered suspending.

Demographic characteristics do not differ significantly between the whole cohort and those who have considered leaving: The only major demographic difference between the survey cohort and those who have considered leaving their course is that prospective early leavers are more likely to have a disability: 28.3 per cent of prospective early leavers report they have a disability (N=792) compared with 20.1 per cent of all respondents (N=3,960).

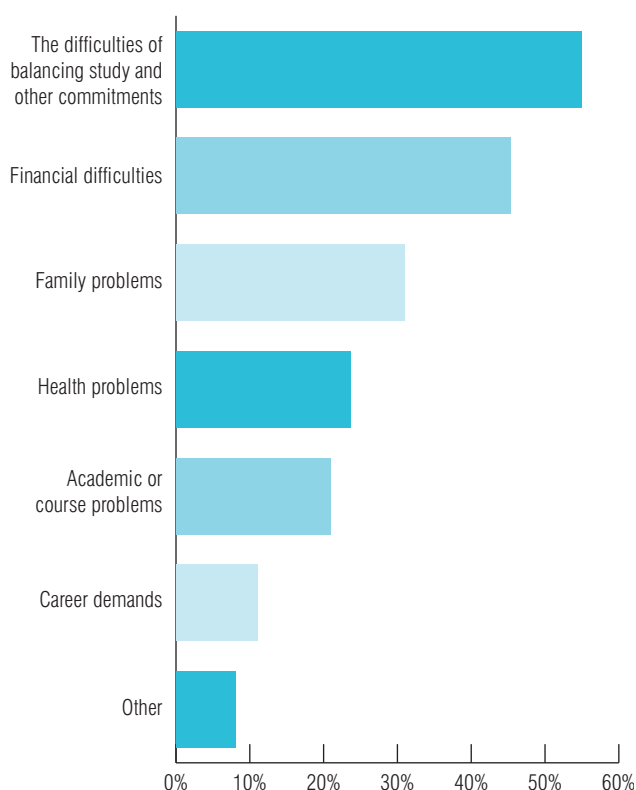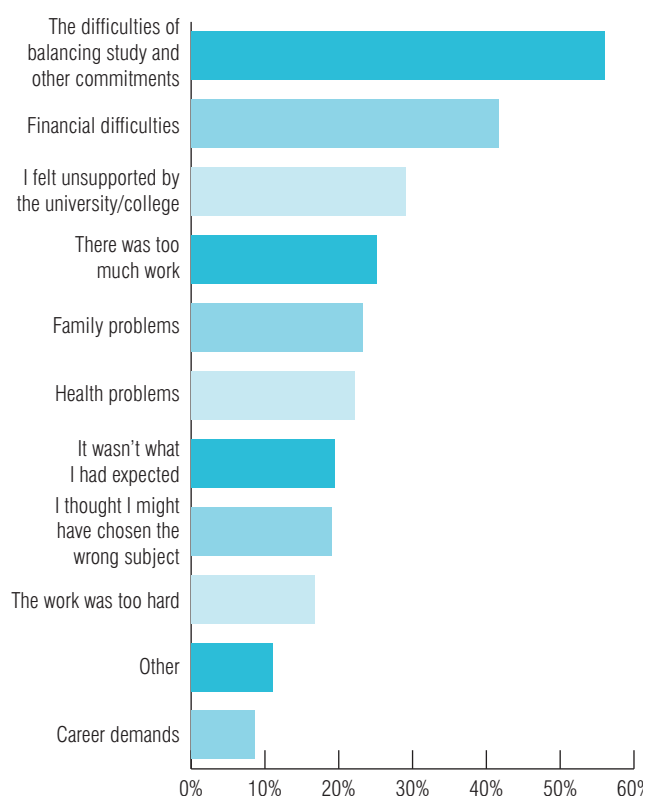Figure 27: What made you consider suspending your studies? (N=1,257)



Figure 28: What was it that made you consider leaving? (N=798)



**More mature students had considered suspending their studies than had considered leaving altogether:** Among survey respondents 33.6 per cent had considered suspending their studies for a period of time (N=3,726) whilst 21.5 per cent had considered leaving altogether (N=3,694). The reasons mature students cite for considering leaving their course or suspending their studies are very close to the general challenges experienced by mature students in higher education (Figures 27 and 28): finance and the struggle to balance study with other commitments. Reviewing 'other' responses reveals some very specific individual circumstances but also common themes around lack of confidence and isolation, disliking the course, struggling with workload and negative attitudes of staff or other students.

**Mature students who have considered suspending their studies or leaving their course are most likely to speak to a tutor or to administrative staff:** Around one-third of those who had considered suspending or leaving spoke to someone about it: 39.1 per cent of those considering suspending (N=1,247) and 34.3 per cent of those considering leaving (N=798). Course lecturers and other students on the course are also reasonably popular choices, although the numbers at this level of analysis are too low to be considered robust.

**Personal ambition is the most significant motivator for staying on course, more so than support networks:** When students who had considered leaving were asked what made them decide to stay (N=796) 70.1 per cent said 'personal ambition', 48.0 per cent said that it was necessary to complete the course to get the job they wanted and for 43.2 per cent support from family and friends was a factor. Fewer respondents cited staff (14.6 per cent) and students (21.2 per cent) as sources of support. While our findings about access to information, student involvement and financial support suggest that a holistic approach to provision in the first place may be the key to tackling retention of mature students, this data suggests that more could be done to activate existing support networks at the point where students are struggling and feel like giving up.

Employment prospects are an important motivator for mature students who often enter higher education with a clear career goal in mind: Mature students at the workshops were very aware of current rates of graduate unemployment and had concerns that they might be at an implicit disadvantage due to their age. At the workshops some participants said that the careers service at their institution was not tailored to mature students and that limited opening times made it difficult to access. Possible solutions proposed included better understanding of the skills and professional knowledge

## Ask @ Birmingham City University E-Mentoring Scheme ("Ask@BCU")

Ask@BCU is a web-based mentoring initiative that provides flexible online support to students while at university, helping to improve student retention and graduate destinations. The online programme is run in conjunction with Brightside, a leading educational charity, and is designed to overcome traditional barriers to mentoring participation such as physical distance and time restraints. It therefore encourages participation from historically disengaged groups such as mature or part-time students, 'first in family' students, care-leavers and student parents.

The scheme began in 2009 with two main strands. Peer online mentoring offers new students one-to-one support and guidance from experienced student peers and helps to overcome the challenges of transition into university and improve student retention, while employer online mentoring offers penultimate and final year students direct access to BCU alumni and globally-based employers. Mentors are able to provide industry support, develop employability skills and prepare students for the world of work.

The scheme has proved popular with both mentors and mentees: 70 per cent of student mentors said they felt their employability skills had significantly improved as a result of their participation and 89 per cent of alumni mentors said that they wanted to continue on the scheme the following year.

that mature students bring into institutions, more focus on developing networks and links between mature students and employers and alumni (this suggestion in particular picks up the question of developing social capital), building professional and career development more overtly into course content, and careers workshops and face-to-face support that acknowledge the different backgrounds and experiences of mature students.

It is important to monitor mature student attainment and understand distance travelled: Mature students appear to be less likely to obtain good degrees. Given the diverse qualifications and backgrounds of mature students and the challenges that they may experience along the way, 'distance travelled' may be considered to be a fairer way of measuring outcomes than absolute attainment. Yet at the same time degree attainment can be held to be a measure of the success of institutional retention and academic support strategies. It may be necessary to start tracking this data at institutional level, perhaps weighting it by qualifications on entry, to determine whether the differential is actually evidence of systematic disadvantage.

# Conclusions

This chapter has tried to avoid presenting mature students' experiences as universally 'broken', and instead explored the prospective impact of developing and enhancing the support that is currently provided. The research suggests that there is space to make a real difference to the experience of mature students.

It is, perhaps, important that we conceive of the challenges of the mature student experience as one face of the coin on which opportunity constitutes the other side, rather than as betokening significant failures on the part of higher education institutions, students' unions or indeed, mature students themselves. It should be possible to celebrate the achievement of mature students and the institutions that support them while acknowledging that there is progress to be made in understanding and supporting these ambitious, but occasionally vulnerable, students.

One important lesson is that it is unlikely that making one-off interventions in a single area of the student

experience will make a big difference to the quality of the experience. A holistic approach built on a model of timely, tailored interventions from a range of institutional actors, including teaching and administrative staff and the students' union, is likely to be more effective. A partnership approach that includes mature students themselves as co-designers and deliverers of support will be crucial to ensuring that provision is joined-up and that higher education as a culture continues to adapt to the needs of mature students.

Strategies to improve mature student retention should be seen as a positive first step, rather than an end. For some mature students completing the course is the major achievement, others will not be satisfied without a First. The rate of progression of mature students to further study may in time come to be seen as a key indicator of the extent to which higher education has managed to fit itself more effectively to mature student needs – this would be very welcome. Higher education should have ambitions for mature students equal to the levels of ambition mature students have for themselves.

# Maximising talent and opportunity in higher education

*"University is an experience I would recommend to anyone who wants to expand their knowledge, no matter what their age."*

# Maximising Talent and Opportunity in Higher Education

The diversity of the undergraduate student body is one of the greatest strengths of the UK higher education system. The overwhelming majority of mature students have a positive university experience and it is vital that individuals whose ambitions and desire for knowledge develop later in life are able to realise their aspirations, now and in the future.

The million+ and NUS research has identified a number of issues around access to university, student support, retention and attainment. Potential solutions and means of mitigating these challenges and maximising opportunities are discussed below. In addition rapid changes to the way that higher education is funded, regulated and delivered and to adult skills policy in England mean that the extension of educational opportunities beyond the age of 21 in the UK should not be taken for granted.

We – students, universities, colleges, students' unions, funding bodies and national and devolved governments – must work together to mitigate these risks and increase the likelihood that more mature students will be able to study at university, successfully complete their degrees and progress on from higher education in the future.

## Recognising and Celebrating Mature Students

**Governments and policymakers should recognise and celebrate the presence of mature students in universities and in higher education:** Mature undergraduates constitute nearly a third of all first-degree undergraduates and the expansion of opportunities for students who have taken a less direct route is a unique strength of the UK higher education system. Yet while mature students add richness and depth to the UK student body, their presence and

contribution is rarely reflected in media reporting, political narratives around social mobility or government campaigns about the benefits of higher education. Alongside universities and students themselves, the Government and devolved administrations should take a lead in promoting the diversity of the undergraduate student body and ensure that funding regimes, social mobility strategies and campaigns recognise the fact that not all undergraduates are 18 or 19 years old.

**Recommendation:** The Government should specifically include an analysis of the impact of policy and funding regimes in higher education and in education on mature students; this analysis should inform legislation, parliamentary and other evidence and Ministerial Guidance eg to the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). Equality impact assessments should take account of age.

**Recommendation:** In order to maximise talent and opportunity, government publicity campaigns should be positive and inclusive and challenge the myth that higher education is only for younger people.

**More data should be made publically available about the number, mode of study and locations of mature students studying first degrees at UK universities:** At present HESA publish data on full-time mature students studying for first degree at universities in England and Wales as part of the annual set of Performance Indicators but not on part-time first degree mature students. In addition no data is made publically available for Scotland or Northern Ireland which contributes to the under-recognition of mature participation in higher education.

**Recommendation:** HESA should report annually on the number, mode of study and locations of mature students studying first degrees at UK universities.

# Access and Pathways to University

There is a case for recognising mature students as a widening participation group: Outreach activities that could enhance mature student participation are not recognised in the same way as outreach work with schools. Universities undertake a diverse array of innovative outreach activities that are designed to raise aspirations in local communities including the aspirations of prospective mature students. Many institutions already include mature students in their widening participation targets and there is a strong argument for recognising the importance of promoting access to higher education among adult learners in access agreements and in any institutional strategic assessments in respect of widening participation that are required by the Funding Councils.

Recommendation: Mature students should be recognised as a widening participation group by the Funding Councils and by OFFA. OFFA should specifically take account of the activities of universities in relation to mature students.

Mature students use information sources in a different way: The higher and further education sectors should work with public and private providers of information to prospective students to ensure that the specific questions and concerns of prospective mature students are addressed. The new national careers service can add value by ensuring the information it offers is targeted, relevant and actively promotes the values of lifelong learning and higher education and universities should consider moving towards Matrix-accredited information, advice and guidance services to ensure that advice and support services for prospective mature students are of the highest standards.

Recommendation: Universities and colleges should recognise the extent to which mature students rely on institutional sources of information and take this into account in terms of website design, contents and other publicity and information strategies.

Recommendation: Public and institutional providers of information about higher education institutions should consider integrating information about geographical proximity, availability and costs of local child-care, whether the campus is child-friendly, family accommodation options, flexible study options and local travel connections and costs.

The reductions in overall undergraduate student numbers and the introduction of core and margin policies in England are likely to reduce choice and opportunities and the unit of resource available for mature students: The 2012 BIS grant letter to HEFCE confirmed that the 10,000 University Modernisation Fund student numbers would not be consolidated and announced an additional cut of 5,000 student numbers for 2012–13. In addition Ministers have introduced a student number allocation system that incentivises institutions to chase young candidates AAB or equivalent qualifications in 2012–13 and ABB or equivalent in 2013–14 rather than mature students who may have lower or non-traditional qualifications. This policy has resulted in the redistribution of more than 10,000 university places to further education colleges for 2012–13 and there is no guarantee that all of these places will be related to honours degree programmes. Our research shows that prospective mature students often apply to just one institution. If their institution of choice is full or has fewer places to offer then it is not clear that they will be able to realise their aspiration of entering higher education. The student numbers market also has the potential to drive down the unit of resource in those universities that currently recruit more mature students.

Recommendation: The impact of the 2012–13 student numbers market on the student choice and enrolments of mature students and on the resource available via the Student Loans Company in the institutions at which they study should be closely monitored. This impact should also be assessed in terms of the potential for 'double disadvantage' – for example in terms of disability and ethnicity.

University admissions processes need to be sufficiently flexible and support the aspirations of mature students: Many mature students apply late on

in the admissions cycle and directly to their institution of choice and it is important that admissions processes are sufficiently flexible in this regard. It is in this respect disappointing that the UCAS Admissions Process Review focused on a post-qualifications applications system geared primarily towards younger students with A-Level qualifications. UCAS has also recommended that qualifications should be rated according to how demanding they are but does not propose to rate vocational qualifications unless they are identified as a priority by higher education institutions. Inevitably any demand rating system which excludes vocational qualifications would potentially be disadvantageous to some applicants and in particular to mature students.

Recommendation: UCAS should consider optional admissions tools to provide for a more flexible admissions process that meets the needs of all students and recognise that many mature students apply directly to institutions.

# Finance

The National Scholarship Programme (NSP) is unlikely to support many mature students in its current form and should be re-thought: The HE White Paper's description of the National Scholarship Programme as a measure that will help "improve access to higher education amongst the least well off young people and adults" is optimistic. The NSP is not a national programme but rather a postcode lottery whereby students from identical socio-economic backgrounds will receive different types and levels of benefit depending on where they study. A series of million+ focus groups in 2011 found widespread confusion about the National Scholarship Programme amongst both young and older prospective students. In addition workshops undertaken by NUS during March 2012 found that NSP regulations seriously hampered institutions from offering cash-equivalent benefits to mature students other than fee waivers, which offer no immediate benefit to the student and merely serve to drive down costs to Government[23]. Accommodation discounts and other on-campus benefits are less appropriate for mature students, who would prefer cash-in-hand to cover additional course costs, travel,

parking and childcare. In some cases it may be possible for institutions to think more creatively about cash-equivalent benefits, but ultimately this is only making the best of a bad policy.

Recommendation: The Government should go back to the drawing board and devise a national scheme with national eligibility criteria and awards that genuinely support students from less advantaged backgrounds whatever their age. Institutions should be free to offer benefits to students that are appropriate for their student demographic and that respect the principle of student choice.

The student support system should recognise flexibility in the way that students study: There are no obvious reasons why part-time fee loans in England should have been restricted to 75 per cent of the full-time higher fee cap and this fundamentally misunderstands how part-time students study. in practice there is a good deal of flexibility in intensity of study and students may switch mode according to work and family commitments and the number of modules that they have been able to study in previous years. That the current full-time and part-time fee regulations prevent universities from charging fees on a pro-rata basis will act as a barrier to the promotion of flexible learning opportunities that would benefit students including in respect of accelerated degrees. If the Government and Funding Council offered a more flexible funding package to institutions in England, the quid pro quo is likely to be that institutions would offer more flexible learning opportunities to students.

Recommendation: The Government should move to a fees and student support regime which is holistic and which recognises and incentivises the flexible learning which mature students often prefer.

The additional costs of recruiting and supporting mature students through their study should continue to be recognised: million+ and NUS welcome the Government's commitment to retaining the widening participation premium as set out in the 2012 Grant Letter to HEFCE. The additional costs of recruiting and supporting students from non-traditional backgrounds should be recognised through retaining the teaching

enhancement, student success and widening participation streams of the HEFCE teaching grant into 2013 and beyond.

Recommendation: The Widening Participation Premium (Student Opportunity Fund) and the retention element of the Teaching Enhancement and Student Success funding stream should be maintained in perpetuity.

# Attainment and Outcomes

Universities, FE colleges and student unions should take a holistic view of mature student pathways to university and the experience of all students: This holistic view should encompass the provision of information about courses of study and life on campus; induction; enhancements to teaching and learning practice, timely provision of course timetables, reading lists and information about placements; childcare availability and child-friendly space on campus; financial support including provision of advice and information; support from designated staff; representation and feedback; careers advice and guidance; and student support networks and social activities.

Recommendation: Universities, colleges and student unions should review and carefully consider the findings of this report. Where good practice exists it should be shared.

Universities and higher education institutions should consider the implications of this research in terms of the completion rates and degree attainment of mature students: Mature students were less likely to achieve good honours degrees in 2009–10 and are also less likely to complete their degree courses than younger students. Whilst it seems reasonable to assume that this reflects the cumulative array of challenges that mature students may face, there may also be scope for improvement in the extent to which higher education monitors and supports the aspirations of mature students. Wider use of attainment data has the potential to help ensure that mature students have equality of outcomes compared to their younger peers.

Recommendation: Universities and higher education institutions should monitor degree attainment data by age and, if appropriate, develop interventions where there are clear and consistent patterns of divergence between young and mature students

Better value-added metrics are needed to fully assess the benefits that higher education can bring for mature students: As a cohort, mature students are more likely to have certain characteristics and vulnerabilities that make their higher education experience both deeply rewarding and more challenging. Focusing on 'distance travelled' rather than absolute attainment outcomes will help us to better understand educational value-added and support a generous view of social mobility that sees beyond pure employment/income outcomes.

Recommendation: Funding councils should carry out or commission research into the mature student attainment differential and its causes, especially whether pre-existing disadvantage tends to be exacerbated or mitigated during the mature higher education journey.

Recommendation: The HESA Performance Indicators group should ask interested sector stakeholders (eg the Higher Education Academy) to put forward ideas on how we can better measure or articulate 'distance travelled' during higher education for both young and mature students.

The tendency of some employers and professions to take account of degree classification and A-level grades may undervalue the potential contribution to the workforce of mature graduates: Entry to the professions and many graduate schemes is usually determined by degree classification which has implications if mature students are less likely to obtain good degrees. Too often, prior educational achievement, institution of study and unpaid internships also play a role in recruitment practices. Employers and the professions are therefore likely to miss out on the talent and drive that people who have been to university later in life can make bring to the workplace. Mature students would also welcome a more tailored approach to the provision of careers advice and guidance.

**Recommendation:** The Government's Social Mobility Tsar, Alan Milburn, should explore the impact of formal and informal entry requirements for particular occupations and professions on the opportunities available to mature students.

**Recommendation:** The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) should work to gather and disseminate best practice in the provision of careers support to mature students.

# Future Participation

**Higher undergraduate tuition fees in England may act as a deterrent to prospective mature students who tend to be more debt averse:** Mature students are known to be more debt averse than younger students and to date[24] applications from individuals aged 21 or above via UCAS for full time degree courses starting in 2012–13 have fallen by 11.4 per cent year-on-year compared to a 6.6 per cent drop among applicants aged 17–20). The Government invested in a campaign to publicise the new undergraduate fee and finance system to younger learners but very little resource has been invested in informing prospective mature and/or part-time students about the new system. Given that the majority of mature students study full time and that mature students represent a fifth of all full-time undergraduates this is a serious omission.

**Recommendation:** BIS should invest real resource in a national publicity campaign designed to reach mature and part-time students that takes into account the more complex financial circumstances of many prospective mature students.

**There are reasons to be concerned about the impact of the funding regime changes in England on both part-time and full-time mature students:** million+ and NUS have welcomed the extension of fee loans to part-time undergraduates studying at the rate of at least 25 per cent of a full time degree course in England as this rectifies a historic imbalance in the provision of financial support for part-time students, the majority of whom are mature. However it is not clear whether this will encourage participation or whether the higher overall fee will act as a deterrent given high levels of debt

adversity and the fact that students who study part-time are still not entitled to maintenance loans and grants[25]. In addition the extension of the repayment period from 25 to 30 years means that some mature graduates will have an obligation to repay their fee loans into their sixties and nearing retirement age. It is unfortunate that the interim equality assessment published by BIS in November 2010 was silent on the potential impact of the new full-time fees regime in terms of age.

**Recommendation:** The impact of the fees and student support regimes introduced in 2012–13 on the participation of mature students must be monitored, assessed and the funding regimes reviewed if the participation of mature students declines.

**Planned changes to the funding of Level 3 qualifications for older learners risk damaging mature student participation in both further and higher education:** The planned withdrawal of the 50 per cent direct funding that is currently available to adults in England aged 24 and over who wish to study for Level 3 qualifications from 2013-14 is likely to reinforce existing disadvantage and represent a major barrier to social mobility. Among the 2,149 survey respondents who applied to university or college with Level 3 qualifications, nearly two thirds (65.4 per cent) completed these qualifications when they were aged 24 or over (Figure 29). Far from affecting a minority of individuals, this policy will affect large numbers of prospective mature students, regardless of the type of Level 3 qualification. That individuals over the age of 24 who aspire to enter higher education will face the prospect of either paying higher Level 3 course fees upfront or taking on one or two years of FE fee loans as a precondition for entry to higher education is likely to act as a major disincentive to future participation in higher education by mature students. Access to HE courses are of special importance in building the skills and confidence of mature students seeking to enter higher education and "learn to love learning again".

**Recommendation:** The Government should restore 50 per cent funding of Level 3 qualifications for those adults over 24 until there has been a full impact assessment of the new HE system on older students.

**Recommendation:** The Government along with the higher and further education sectors should consider the importance of Access to HE courses in enhancing social mobility and take steps to ensure that they are affordable (especially in the context of intended progression into a higher education course), accessible and of a suitable quality.

Figure 29: Were you aged 24 or over when you began studying for (your highest) qualification?

| Level 3 Qualifications | Number holding qualification | Aged over 24 when starting qualification (%) |
|---|---|---|
| A-levels/Highers | 755 | 52.1 |
| Access to HE | 731 | 80.2 |
| Vocational qualification at Level 3 | 635 | 66.0 |

# Concluding remarks

The million+ and NUS research has generated a rich dataset which should inform the future policy and practice of governments, universities and students unions. Throughout the research process we were struck by the extent to which mature students valued the opportunity to participate in higher education and how far they were prepared to go to meet the challenges of studying at university later in life. For many, studying for a degree for the first time opened new opportunities and brought deep sense of personal achievement and satisfaction. We call on Government, the higher and further education sectors and students' unions to respond to the challenges presented here in a thoughtful and timely way. We cannot afford to let the mature students of the future down.

# Appendix

Figure 30: Young and mature first degree undergraduates at UK universities (HESA 2009–10)

| University | Young students | Mature students | All students | % mature |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Institute of Education | 0 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Birkbeck College | 135 | 4,000 | 4,135 | 96.7 |
| The Open University | 6,225 | 99,245 | 105,475 | 94.1 |
| University of the Highlands and Islands | 400 | 1,205 | 1,605 | 75.2 |
| London South Bank University | 4,005 | 7,455 | 11,460 | 65 |
| Glyndŵr University | 1,100 | 1,935 | 3,035 | 63.7 |
| Thames Valley University | 2,495 | 4,075 | 6,570 | 62 |
| University Campus Suffolk | 1,015 | 1,650 | 2,665 | 61.9 |
| The University of East London | 6,290 | 9,990 | 16,285 | 61.4 |
| The University of Bolton | 1,820 | 2,455 | 4,280 | 57.4 |
| London Metropolitan University | 6,155 | 8,105 | 14,260 | 56.8 |
| The University of the West of Scotland | 3,885 | 4,425 | 8,310 | 53.3 |
| The University of Buckingham | 400 | 445 | 845 | 52.9 |
| Edinburgh Napier University | 5,280 | 5,480 | 10,760 | 50.9 |
| The University of Greenwich | 7,415 | 6,900 | 14,320 | 48.2 |
| Anglia Ruskin University | 5,485 | 4,915 | 10,405 | 47.2 |
| The University of Teesside | 4,940 | 4,085 | 9,030 | 45.3 |
| The University of Wales, Trinity St David | 1,590 | 1,290 | 2,885 | 44.8 |
| The University of Wales, Newport | 2,100 | 1,580 | 3,685 | 42.9 |
| Rose Bruford College | 525 | 385 | 910 | 42.3 |
| Scottish Agricultural College | 275 | 200 | 475 | 41.9 |
| University of Derby | 6,320 | 4,515 | 10,835 | 41.7 |
| University of Bedfordshire | 5,145 | 3,630 | 8,775 | 41.4 |
| Buckinghamshire New University | 2,720 | 1,875 | 4,600 | 40.8 |
| The University of Wolverhampton | 7,715 | 5,090 | 12,810 | 39.7 |
| Glasgow Caledonian University | 7,845 | 5,070 | 12,915 | 39.3 |
| St George's Hospital Medical School | 1,395 | 900 | 2,290 | 39.2 |
| Middlesex University | 8,170 | 5,250 | 13,420 | 39.1 |
| The University of Salford | 8,540 | 5,440 | 13,980 | 38.9 |
| University of Glamorgan | 6,865 | 4,310 | 11,170 | 38.6 |
| The University of Northampton | 4,325 | 2,710 | 7,030 | 38.5 |
| University College Birmingham | 1,460 | 890 | 2,350 | 37.8 |
| Swansea Metropolitan University | 2,060 | 1,230 | 3,285 | 37.4 |
| Writtle College | 390 | 230 | 620 | 37.1 |
| Staffordshire University | 6,195 | 3,625 | 9,820 | 36.9 |

| University | Young students | Mature students | All students | % mature |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| University of Abertay Dundee | 2,200 | 1,220 | 3,420 | 35.7 |
| The University of Worcester | 3,015 | 1,645 | 4,660 | 35.3 |
| Canterbury Christ Church University | 5,425 | 2,870 | 8,295 | 34.6 |
| The University of Plymouth | 11,020 | 5,760 | 16,780 | 34.3 |
| The University of Westminster | 9,090 | 4,730 | 13,820 | 34.2 |
| Birmingham City University | 8,855 | 4,600 | 13,460 | 34.2 |
| The University of Sunderland | 5,710 | 2,965 | 8,675 | 34.2 |
| Edge Hill University | 4,990 | 2,580 | 7,565 | 34.1 |
| The University of Huddersfield | 7,865 | 4,000 | 11,865 | 33.7 |
| University of the Arts, London | 7,255 | 3,680 | 10,940 | 33.6 |
| University of Cumbria | 3,510 | 1,775 | 5,285 | 33.5 |
| The University of Northumbria at Newcastle | 13,070 | 6,505 | 19,575 | 33.2 |
| The Robert Gordon University | 5,400 | 2,670 | 8,065 | 33.1 |
| Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh | 2,125 | 1,025 | 3,150 | 32.6 |
| The University of Central Lancashire | 10,565 | 4,965 | 15,530 | 32 |
| Trinity University College | 925 | 415 | 1,345 | 31 |
| The University of Dundee | 6,580 | 2,945 | 9,525 | 30.9 |
| University College Plymouth St Mark and St John | 1,335 | 585 | 1,920 | 30.6 |
| Coventry University | 9,725 | 4,250 | 13,975 | 30.4 |
| Liverpool Hope University | 3,350 | 1,460 | 4,815 | 30.4 |
| Edinburgh College of Art | 890 | 385 | 1,275 | 30.3 |
| Newman University College | 1,405 | 605 | 2,010 | 30.1 |
| The University of Bradford | 6,010 | 2,565 | 8,575 | 29.9 |
| University of Wales Institute, Cardiff | 4,985 | 2,095 | 7,080 | 29.6 |
| The University of Brighton | 8,700 | 3,620 | 12,325 | 29.4 |
| Goldsmiths College | 3,285 | 1,340 | 4,625 | 28.9 |
| Roehampton University | 4,140 | 1,620 | 5,760 | 28.1 |
| The University of Hull | 8,835 | 3,430 | 12,270 | 28 |
| The University of Stirling | 5,220 | 1,940 | 7,160 | 27.1 |
| Heythrop College | 360 | 135 | 490 | 27 |
| Kingston University | 12,520 | 4,545 | 17,065 | 26.6 |
| Glasgow School of Art | 1,075 | 390 | 1,465 | 26.6 |
| Oxford Brookes University | 7,590 | 2,740 | 10,330 | 26.5 |
| University of Ulster | 12,950 | 4,665 | 17,615 | 26.5 |
| Bishop Grosseteste University College Lincoln | 785 | 280 | 1,070 | 26.4 |
| Norwich University College of the Arts | 835 | 300 | 1,135 | 26.3 |
| University of Hertfordshire | 12,250 | 4,375 | 16,625 | 26.3 |
| Ravensbourne | 510 | 180 | 690 | 26.3 |
| De Montfort University | 9,990 | 3,520 | 13,515 | 26.1 |

| University | Young students | Mature students | All students | % mature |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sheffield Hallam University | 15,790 | 5,475 | 21,265 | 25.7 |
| Bournemouth University | 8,485 | 2,900 | 11,380 | 25.5 |
| University of the West of England, Bristol | 14,355 | 4,895 | 19,250 | 25.4 |
| Bangor University | 5,570 | 1,890 | 7,460 | 25.3 |
| Liverpool John Moores University | 12,695 | 4,265 | 16,960 | 25.1 |
| The City University | 4,925 | 1,635 | 6,560 | 24.9 |
| Southampton Solent University | 7,355 | 2,395 | 9,745 | 24.6 |
| The University of Lincoln | 6,985 | 2,260 | 9,240 | 24.4 |
| The University of East Anglia | 7,470 | 2,400 | 9,870 | 24.3 |
| University of Chester | 4,990 | 1,580 | 6,570 | 24 |
| The University of Chichester | 2,580 | 795 | 3,380 | 23.6 |
| Stranmillis University College | 780 | 240 | 1,020 | 23.6 |
| The Manchester Metropolitan University | 19,085 | 5,555 | 24,640 | 22.5 |
| Conservatoire for Dance and Drama | 495 | 145 | 640 | 22.3 |
| University for the Creative Arts | 4,080 | 1,165 | 5,245 | 22.2 |
| The Royal Veterinary College | 1,095 | 315 | 1,410 | 22.2 |
| The University of Essex | 6,475 | 1,835 | 8,310 | 22.1 |
| University College Falmouth | 2,255 | 635 | 2,890 | 21.9 |
| Leeds Metropolitan University | 14,015 | 3,920 | 17,940 | 21.8 |
| The Arts University College at Bournemouth | 1,520 | 410 | 1,935 | 21.3 |
| Guildhall School of Music and Drama | 405 | 110 | 515 | 21.2 |
| University of Gloucestershire | 4,810 | 1,275 | 6,085 | 21 |
| The University of Portsmouth | 13,065 | 3,465 | 16,525 | 21 |
| Bath Spa University | 3,340 | 875 | 4,210 | 20.7 |
| The School of Oriental and African Studies | 2,005 | 525 | 2,525 | 20.7 |
| Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance | 490 | 125 | 615 | 20.6 |
| Swansea University | 8,255 | 2,145 | 10,400 | 20.6 |
| Central School of Speech and Drama | 445 | 110 | 555 | 20.2 |
| York St John University | 3,110 | 775 | 3,885 | 19.9 |
| The University of Winchester | 3,445 | 825 | 4,270 | 19.4 |
| The University of Aberdeen | 8,555 | 2,000 | 10,555 | 18.9 |
| Heriot-Watt University | 4,810 | 1,105 | 5,920 | 18.7 |
| The Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts | 540 | 120 | 665 | 18.4 |
| King's College London | 9,700 | 2,180 | 11,880 | 18.4 |
| The University of Sussex | 6,685 | 1,495 | 8,180 | 18.3 |
| St Mary's University College, Twickenham | 2,415 | 525 | 2,940 | 17.8 |
| Queen Mary and Westfield College | 8,725 | 1,885 | 10,610 | 17.8 |
| The University of Strathclyde | 10,460 | 2,255 | 12,715 | 17.7 |
| Leeds Trinity University College | 1,935 | 395 | 2,330 | 17 |

| University | Young students | Mature students | All students | % mature |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Brunel University | 9,065 | 1,835 | 10,895 | 16.8 |
| The Queen's University of Belfast | 11,630 | 2,315 | 13,945 | 16.6 |
| The School of Pharmacy | 600 | 115 | 715 | 16.2 |
| The Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama | 525 | 100 | 625 | 16 |
| The University of Surrey | 6,805 | 1,285 | 8,090 | 15.9 |
| The University of Keele | 5,160 | 970 | 6,130 | 15.8 |
| The University of Glasgow | 13,490 | 2,440 | 15,935 | 15.3 |
| The Nottingham Trent University | 16,335 | 2,925 | 19,265 | 15.2 |
| Aberystwyth University | 6,040 | 1,035 | 7,075 | 14.7 |
| The University of Kent | 11,065 | 1,855 | 12,920 | 14.4 |
| The University of Liverpool | 12,130 | 2,000 | 14,130 | 14.2 |
| The University of Southampton | 12,245 | 1,995 | 14,240 | 14 |
| The University of Leicester | 7,955 | 1,230 | 9,185 | 13.4 |
| Royal Agricultural College | 580 | 85 | 670 | 13 |
| The University of Nottingham | 18,320 | 2,650 | 20,975 | 12.6 |
| The University of Warwick | 10,680 | 1,435 | 12,115 | 11.8 |
| The University of Sheffield | 14,975 | 1,995 | 16,970 | 11.8 |
| The University of Reading | 7,685 | 1,020 | 8,705 | 11.7 |
| Cardiff University | 14,495 | 1,895 | 16,390 | 11.6 |
| University College London | 10,710 | 1,295 | 12,005 | 10.8 |
| The University of York | 8,245 | 970 | 9,215 | 10.5 |
| Royal Holloway and Bedford New College | 6,110 | 720 | 6,830 | 10.5 |
| The University of Manchester | 23,690 | 2,760 | 26,450 | 10.4 |
| St Mary's University College | 795 | 90 | 885 | 10.1 |
| The University of Edinburgh | 15,860 | 1,755 | 17,615 | 10 |
| Aston University | 6,695 | 720 | 7,415 | 9.7 |
| Harper Adams University College | 1,210 | 130 | 1,340 | 9.7 |
| Leeds College of Music | 525 | 55 | 580 | 9.5 |
| The University of Leeds | 20,370 | 2,110 | 22,480 | 9.4 |
| The University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne | 12,600 | 1,295 | 13,890 | 9.3 |
| Royal College of Music | 325 | 35 | 355 | 9.2 |
| The University of Birmingham | 15,625 | 1,545 | 17,175 | 9 |
| The University of Exeter | 10,760 | 925 | 11,685 | 7.9 |
| Royal Academy of Music | 305 | 25 | 330 | 7 |
| Royal Northern College of Music | 440 | 35 | 475 | 7 |
| The University of St Andrews | 5,825 | 410 | 6,235 | 6.6 |
| The University of Bristol | 11,800 | 810 | 12,610 | 6.4 |
| Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine | 8,035 | 535 | 8,570 | 6.2 |
| The University of Lancaster | 7,635 | 510 | 8,140 | 6.2 |

| University | Young students | Mature students | All students | % mature |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| The University of Bath | 8,345 | 545 | 8,890 | 6.1 |
| University of Durham | 10,570 | 670 | 11,240 | 6 |
| The University of Cambridge | 11,190 | 645 | 11,835 | 5.5 |
| The University of Oxford | 10,905 | 535 | 11,440 | 4.7 |
| London School of Economics and Political Science | 3,830 | 170 | 4,000 | 4.2 |
| Courtauld Institute of Art | 145 | 5 | 150 | 3.3 |
| Loughborough University | 11,330 | 450 | 11,775 | 3.8 |
| UK Universities | 991,955 | 429,460 | 1,421,490 | 30.2 |

## HESA Reporting Requirements

HESA data is reported in line with HESA Services Standard Rounding Methodology requirements:

- 0, 1, 2 must be rounded to 0

- All other numbers must be rounded to the nearest multiple of 5

- Percentages based on 52 or fewer individuals must be suppressed

- Averages based on 7 or fewer individuals must be suppressed

HESA cannot accept responsibility for any inferences or conclusions derived from the data by third parties.

## Survey Methodology

The million+ and NUS online survey of mature students ran between 3 November and 9 December 2011. Before completing the survey respondents were asked to confirm:

- That they were aged 21 or over

- That they were studying for an undergraduate degree for the first time

- That they were aged 21 or over when they started the qualification

The survey received 4,567 responses. The survey automatically excluded those respondents who answered no to the questions testing their validity as survey participants.

We excluded those respondents whose age could not be verified or who had reported their age as below 21. We also excluded those who did not provide a response to question 15 (mode of study), which was the last purely demographic question.

Following this we tested the drop-out rate at points throughout the survey. At Question 49, 4 per cent of respondents had dropped out. At Question 62, 7 per cent of respondents had dropped out. We felt this was acceptable. The final number of valid respondents was 3,963.

The characteristics of the 3,963 valid survey respondents vis-à-vis the mature student population as a whole are set out in Figure 31.

Figure 31: Characteristics of survey respondents versus the mature student population (Mature Students Survey and HESA 2009–10)

| | | HESA 2009–10 (%) | Survey sample (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | 57.4 | 27.4 |
| | Female | 42.6 | 72.4 |
| | Other | n/a | 0.2 |
| Age | 21–24 | 39.9 | 14.3 |
| | 25–29 | 19.8 | 20.9 |
| | 30–34 | 12.2 | 15.1 |
| | 35–39 | 10.3 | 14.0 |
| | 40–44 | 7.9 | 15.0 |
| | 45+ | 9.9 | 20.7 |
| Ethnicity (UK-domiciled only) | White | 76.9 | 88.5 |
| | Black | 9.6 | 3.9 |
| | Asian | 6.2 | 1.8 |
| | Other (including mixed) | 3.8 | 4.3 |
| | Unknown | 3.5 | 1.4 |
| Domicile | UK | 86.7 | 89.1 |
| | EU | 4.7 | 7.0 |
| | International | 8.6 | 3.9 |
| Disability | Disability | 10.5 | 20.1 |
| | No Disability | 78.3 | 77.9 |
| | Unknown | 11.2 | 2.0 |
| Mode | Full-Time | 57.6 | 63.7 |
| | Part-Time | 42.4 | 36.3 |
| Subject | Architecture, building and planning | 2.9 | 1.0 |
| | Biological sciences | 8.3 | 3.8 |
| | Business and administrative studies | 11.7 | 6.9 |
| | Creative arts and design | 7.2 | 7.2 |
| | Education | 5.1 | 6.8 |
| | Engineering & technology | 6.2 | 3.7 |
| | Historical and philosophical studies | 4.5 | 5.1 |
| | Language, literature, linguistics, classics and related subjects | 4.3 | 7.7 |
| | Law | 4.0 | 2.5 |
| | Mass communications and documentation | 1.6 | 0.4 |
| | Mathematical and computer sciences | 6.3 | 3.1 |
| | Medicine and dentistry | 2.4 | 1.8 |
| | Physical sciences | 3.2 | 3.1 |
| | Social studies | 10.2 | 15.3 |
| | Subjects allied to medicine | 14.7 | 5.0 |
| | Veterinary science, agriculture and related subjects | 0.7 | 0.4 |
| | Combined subjects | 6.9 | 7.6 |
| | Other | n/a | 18.8 |

# Endnotes

[1] Robbins, L. (1963) *The Report of the Robbins Committee on Higher Education*. London, HMSO.

[2] Williams, J. (ed.) (1997) *Negotiating Access to Higher Education: the discourse of selectivity and equity*. Buckingham, Open University Press.

[3] Jackson, S. and Jamieson, A. (2009) 'Higher education, mature students and employment goals: policies and practices in the UK', *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 61 (4): 399–411.

[4] Department for Education and Employment (1992) Statistical Bulletin, London, HMSO.

[5] HESA Performance Indicators: Definitions. http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2379

[6] Coleman, R and Bekhradnia, B. (2011) *Higher Education Supply and Demand to 2020, Higher Education Policy Institute*: Oxford.

[7] Leitch Review of Skills (2006) *Prosperity for all in the Global Economy – World Class Skills*. London, HM Treasury.

[8] HESA data is reported in line with HESA Services Standard Rounding Methodology requirements. See Appendix for details and disclaimer.

[9] See Appendix for full survey methodology.

[10] Connor, H. and Dewson, S. (2001) 'Social class and HE: Issues affecting decisions about participation by lower social class groups', DfES Research Report No. 267.

[11] Interestingly 21-24 year olds were decidedly underrepresented in the million+ and NUS mature student survey, despite the youthful skew among mature students on the NUS Extra database to which the survey was distributed to. This implies that mature students do not always identify as such until they are aged 25 and above, a finding reinforced in regional workshops with mature students.

[12] Tinklin, T., Riddell, S. and Wilson, A. (2004) 'Disabled Students in Higher Education', CES Briefing No. 32.

[13] Bhattacharyya, G., Ison, L. & Blair, M. (2003) 'Minority Ethnic Attainment and Participation in Education and Training', Research Topic Paper RTP01–03. University of Birmingham and DfES.

[14] Of the 731 respondents with Access to HE qualifications 80.2 per cent started studying when aged 24 or over.

[15] For applicants up to and including the 2007/08 academic year and for the 2009/10 academic year, UCAS asked: "If you are under 21, please give the occupation of your parent, step-parent or guardian who earns the most. If he or she is retired or unemployed, give their most recent occupation. If you are 21 or over, please give your own occupation."

[16] Universities UK and GuildHE (2006) *Part-time students and part-time study in higher education in the UK Strand 3: a survey of students' attitudes and experiences of part-time study and its costs 2005/06.*

[17] This method is based on tracking students from the year they enter an institution to the following year for full-time students or the following two years for part-time students.

[18] The UCAS service only deals with applications for full-time courses so low usage of UCAS by mature students reflects in part the number of mature students who study part-time. However this is not the full story: 546 survey respondents who were studying on a full-time basis applied to their institution through routes other than UCAS.

[19] We present aggregate HESA statistics here but it is worth noting that there is in practice a good deal of flexibility in intensity of study. Universities report that mature students are more likely to switch from full-time to part-time or vice versa than younger students, according to work and family commitments and the number of modules that they have been able to study in previous years.

[20] The JACS social studies category includes social work.

[21] The HESA DHLE survey divides first-degree respondents into four age categories: 20 and under; 2124; 25-29; and 30 and over. For the purpose of this report we use the 25-29 and 30 and over categories to define mature graduates.

[22] It is encouraging that Universities UK and GuildHE have published a statement making a commitment to working towards full transparency in, and where possible reduction of, additional course costs. Statement available here: http://www.guildhe.ac.uk/en/news/index.cfm/nid/0BABAAEC-3B2A-4F9B-848CCD7BECEC13B4.

[23] It is well-understood that some institutions have made use of fee waivers to drive the average fee cost down below £7,500 and become eligible for 'margin' student numbers; this is a slightly different (if not ideal) context for fee waivers and not at issue here.

[24] UCAS applications to April 2012: http://www.ucas.ac.uk/about_us/media_enquiries/media_releases/2012/20120427.

[25] Previous research suggests this is likely to be a disincentive to completion in particular if students need to switch mode from full-time to part-time study. See million+ and London Economics (2007) *Reality Check: Student Finance Regimes.*

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