



## BRIEFING SHEET

# **MATURE/ACCESS LEARNERS**

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## Definitions

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Term	Description
Mature Learners	Learners typically defined as those aged 21 or over when they enter HE.  Mature learners are more likely than their younger counterparts to have characteristics associated with underrepresentation in HE.
Underrepresented Groups	Groups of students who share the following particular characteristics where data shows gaps in equality of opportunity in relation to access, success or progression: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• students from areas of low HE participation, low household income or low socioeconomic status</li><li>• some black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students</li><li>• mature students</li><li>• disabled students</li><li>• care leavers</li></ul>
Imposter Syndrome	The feeling of not belonging or not feeling worthy of being at a certain place. For example, feeling that you are 'not smart enough' to be at university. This can cause a learner to have self-doubts and a lack of confidence (Chapman, 2015)

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## Insight from External Reports

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### Existing Research on Mature Learners

- There is a lack of research exploring mature students therefore a recommendation would be to increase the amount of research to learn more about how we can support them (TASO, November 2020). With research finding that only 41 of the 3,219 research papers about students were about mature learners. There is even less research surrounding the strengths and assets of mature students (Hope & Quinlan, 2020). More research around mature learners' decision-making processes and how institutions can become more flexible is needed (UCAS, Year Unknown)

### Mature Learner Backgrounds

- Access to Higher Education (AHE) is the only option available to mature learners who have not obtained level 3 qualifications. AHE is only one year rather than the usual two years of a level 3 course. AHE students tend to be more motivated because they have 'real world experiences and because they feel there is mutual respect between students and tutors. (Busher and James, 2019). However it is important to note that some mature learners felt that having work experience could work against them with younger learners and lecturers or felt their previous experience was belittled (Chapman 2013)
- Mature learners who left education early (at 15/16) can be split into three main groups: those who are academically able, those who were uncertain about their academic abilities and those who left education to earn a living. These three groups are important because each group will re-enter education for different reasons and with different aspirations. The first group will be more motivated by interest in learning, the second by family transitions and the final group by an increase in maturity. (Chapman 2013)
- Mature students are often limited with their choice of university because they are more likely to have other commitments, and so need to stay in their local area. This can affect what course(s) they apply for and can make it hard for mature students to form a learner identity. They may feel 'different' from other people at the same HEI who do not have the same responsibilities as mature learners. Forming an identity at university is an important part of curating the feeling of belonging to an institution (Chapman, 2015). This is backed up by the

findings of OFFA, who conducted 5 case studies at 5 different universities which all found that mature learners felt that they did not belong and that this was a big issue. The findings suggested that ensuring personalisation of the outreach intervention was important i.e. one-to-one mentoring. This research also felt that universities were 'out of reach' which could be a factor in the prevalence of self-confidence issues (OFFA)

- Mature learners are more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds than students starting university at 18/19 and are more likely to study part-time due to other commitments. Most part-time learners are mature learners. Since 2015 there has been a 61% drop in the number of mature learners studying at HE (OFFA). *We know that covid-19 is likely to have changed this.*
- Many mature learners come from white working class backgrounds where they are the first in their family to attend university. We need our interventions to remove any thoughts about their being potential bias against them regarding this in an HE setting (Hope & Quinlan, 2020)
- Family support is really important in the return to education. This provides the mature learner with a support network and acceptance. Many mature students revealed that going to university was a long-term aspiration and so they are motivated to complete their course. These students can also act as 'cultural change agents' within their home environment and in their community, and act as a role model for other people. Neighbours are reportedly good sources of support for mature learners. It was also reported that children of mature learners became more resilient and self-sufficient because the parent was not at home as much (Hope & Quinlan, 2020)

### Why Mature Learners Come Back to HE

- Mature learners will only return to HE if they believe that it is going to improve their career prospects or earning potential, as they have many barriers to HE and there are many risks associated with returning to education (Chapman, 2013). This can include other priorities including work (some employers inflexible), family (support from family can vary from very supportive to not understanding) and childcare, or mature learners may have had previous negative experiences with education which have decreased their confidence and/or self-belief. (Busher & James, 2019)
- Mature learners tend to apply for more competitive courses which have an acceptance rate of around 70%. Mature learner applications to HE courses tend to be lower when there is an excess of employment opportunities (fewer employment opportunities = more university applications) and when there are changes to HE funding. For example, there was a dip in mature learner applications to HE when fees increased and when the nursing bursary was removed (UCAS)
- *It is predicted that Covid-19 will increase the number of learners looking to return to study as the employment rates shrink. The 16-25 age demographic are likely to feel the effect of this more strongly based on current figures.*

### How Mature Learners Feel at HE

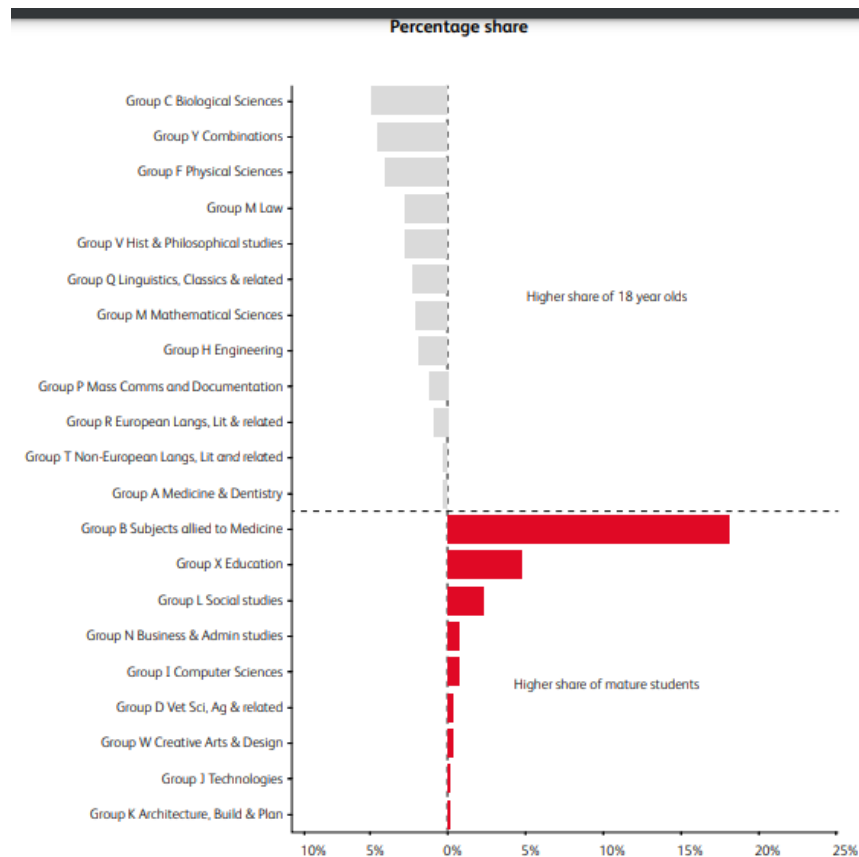
- Imposter syndrome, caused by a majority of the above factors especially negative experiences at school, is a barrier for mature learners (Chapman, 2013)
- Mature students are 'othered' and not particularly catered for at university induction events (Chapman, 2013)
- Chapman (2015) suggested assessing confidence levels of mature learners before starting and throughout a university course. This would allow individuals to see how they have progressed. *This suggests that we should be running a confidence development based intervention for mature learners.*
- Nearly 12% of mature learners leave HE in the first year – twice the amount of young people who leave in the first year. There is a need for more universities to offer more part-time and flexible learning opportunities for mature learners, and for clear information about the practicalities of HE study to allow mature learners to make informed decisions about HE (Miller and Dauncy, 2018). These practicalities such as time-tabling will have produced some more uncertainties because of covid-19 how has flexible study changed?

## Outreach

- Mature learners are harder to reach because they are not found in one place as per school-aged learners and often already have employment and other commitments (OFFA)
- 'For adult learners, outreach can be defined as any targeted activity or intervention which provides information, advice and guidance (IAG), support, and inclusive teaching in a flexible manner, with the aim of building confidence, developing soft skills and raising attainment among this underrepresented community.' The approach to engage mature learners needs to be flexible (OFFA)

## Mature Learner Applications

- 80% of mature learners over the age of 30 live at home, compared to 50% of mature learners aged 21-25 (UCAS)
- UCAS data shows that mature students tend to prefer lower tariff courses.
- In North West England, entry rates for mature learners between 2008- 2017 varied between just under 0.35% - 0.42%. This is third highest after London and Scotland (UCAS).



*%share of mature students and the subjects they are likely to study.*

- Most mature students tend to study subjects allied with medicine, followed by those related to education. This differs from younger students who tend to favour science subjects. However the young student data is a lot more clustered than mature learner data with 20% of mature learners taking medical related subjects. There seems to be a very limited number of subject choices that adult learners take. We may want to think about planning interventions that appeal to mature learners in these common subject choices but are tied to broader subjects as part of it.

## Numbers of Mature Learners

- Between 2011-2012 90% of part-time learners were mature. Most of these students were studying a vocational course part time and working part-time. 62% of these learners were female and 38% were male. 45% had one or more children (Universities UK, 2013)
- One of the main reasons for a decline in mature learners is due to the changes to funding in 2012-2013. The lack of knowledge that employers have about part-time HE, and how upskilling their workers can benefit them,

is another factor. The lack of financial aid offered to mature learners may mean that they cannot afford to access HE (Universities UK, 2013)

- The predominant age range of mature learners across the country is 21-25. This is the same across all regions. However, northern England does tend to have higher rates of older mature students than other parts of the country e.g. NW - 1.14% are 21-25, 0.45% are 26-30, 0.30% are 30-35 and are 0.12% 36-50. These percentages are in proportion of the whole adult population. This suggests that our mature students in the majority likely to be aged 21-25 and 30-35 so we should outreach on these age groups.

## Recommendations

- Recommendations Universities UK (2013):

**Recommendation 1: All stakeholders across the UK, including higher education providers, government, funding councils and others, should consider the needs of part-time and mature students as an intrinsic part of their thinking, not as an add-on.**

**Recommendation 3: Universities and colleges should take bold steps to meet the needs of potential part-time students and improve the part-time student experience.**

**Recommendation 2: There needs to be an urgent push at all levels – national, regional and local – to help potential students and employers understand the value of and opportunities for part-time higher education.**

**Recommendation 4: Employer-focused part-time higher education which meets the needs of the local economy should be boosted.**

- More needs to be done in terms of specific provisions for mature students, for example trying to engage with parents or cultural groups. Some universities have specific access routes for mature learners such as the University of Leeds Lifelong Learning Centre. Transition events for mature students can also be beneficial to help them adapt to university life. Tailored financial support for mature students would also be beneficial as mature learners are not always entitled to the same financial support as younger learners due to higher qualifications they may already hold such as a HNC which may make them exempt. (OFS) This suggests we could open an HE opportunity grant for mature learners.

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*Insight from Internal Reports*

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## Mature Learner Access to Information

- In our own research around parental knowledge about what options are available to their children after compulsory education, knowledge of degree apprenticeships and university were the lowest scoring areas. If parents and carers are unaware of the options for their children, it can reasonably be assumed that they are likely to be unaware of options available to themselves (Hello Future 2020)
- The same report found that parents and carers felt more comfortable talking to their child/dren about their own experiences; for example, if a parent went from school straight to work they are more likely to encourage their children to do the same. This suggests that these parents could be the exact people we want to target in our outreach opportunities for mature learners (Hello Future 2020).

## Outreach Opportunities for Mature Learners

- Parents/ mature learners can be hard to reach because of gated assets or barriers to them accessing information. This can include time, travel and associated costs, feeling like an outsider, or having negative associations with education from previous personal experiences (Hello Future, 2020). To combat this, schools need to take flexible approaches and not see the parents and carers as the issue, but the organisation failing to reach the parents and carers. By being flexible and building a good rapport with the parents and carers they are much more likely to engage them successfully. Parents and carers tend to feel more accepted at voluntary groups which their children attend. Individual basis. (ibid)

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