

# MillionPlus

The Association for  
Modern Universities



## RESEARCH REPORT

# Forgotten Learners: building a system that works for mature students

Published March 2018

# Acknowledgements

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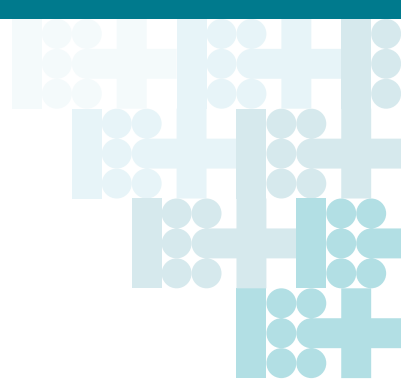
We would like to thank all the mature students who have contributed to this research project by sharing their views and experiences. We would also like to extend a special thank you to Staffordshire University, the University of Bolton, the University of West Scotland and London South Bank University for hosting focus groups that were open to mature students from all institutions.

Finally, we are grateful to the Office for Fair Access for its financial contribution towards the research that underpinned this report, and the expertise and advice of OFFA officials in challenging and shaping the recommendations and conclusions.

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# Foreword

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**Professor David Phoenix OBE**  
Chair and Vice-Chancellor, London  
South Bank University

**Mature students are found at each and every university across the country and play a vital role in creating a vibrant, diverse and inclusive community on campus. Often with a more expansive set of life experiences to draw upon than their younger counterparts, these students enrich the learning environment of all.**

Mature students are more likely to come from population groups that are under-represented in higher education including those from lower-income households, black and minority ethnic communities, or those who are disabled. As such, the decline in mature students applying to university in the last decade also has a knock-on effect on efforts to widen participation and increase access to higher education.

Thinking more broadly, mature students also ensure that the student body represents a wide range of cultures, intellects and backgrounds both inside and outside the classroom.

According to the most recent census data, around 20 million of the UK's working population did not have level 4 qualifications or above. To put that into perspective, the total number of 18 year-olds was just over three quarters of a million at the last count. This means that mature learners represent a huge pool of untapped potential across the UK. In order to meet the challenges we face today – be they those relating to fairness, social justice, skills development, or productivity – it is vital that everyone is able to access educational opportunities. The higher education sector is undergoing a great deal of change in 2018, particularly focused on universities in England, but with consequences for the UK. Governments, providers and policy makers must therefore seize the chance to improve the opportunities for mature students to access and succeed in higher education.

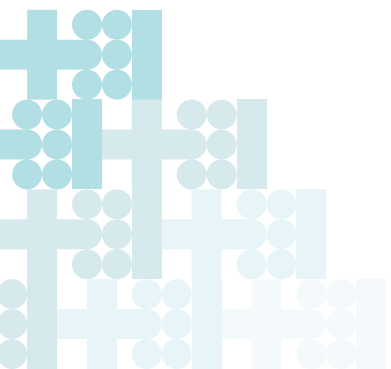


**Dr Greg Walker**  
Chief Executive Officer

**Age should never be a barrier to learning new skills or improving your career prospects. But too often, talented people are missing out on the chance to return to education later in life because of a lack of options that meet their unique needs.**

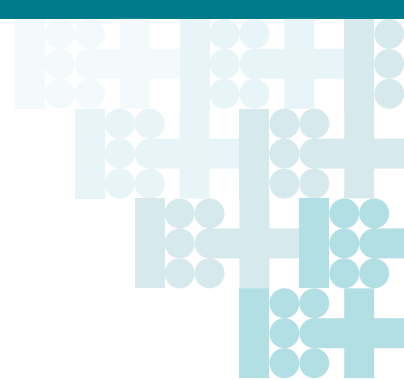
Particularly for people who are juggling their studies with work or caring commitments, the opportunity to study flexibly can open doors and change lives. And the rewards from providing such flexible options are reaped by us all. Mature students bring skills and experience to their studies which contribute to a more diverse student body. There is a clear societal and economic benefit to people succeeding in higher education – whatever stage of their life they come to it. And a successful higher education experience can have a huge impact on the confidence and aspirations of individuals, families and even communities.

The new Office for Students has rightly identified reversing the decline in numbers of mature students from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds as a key priority. I hope that this continued focus will enable the sector to achieve the transformational change we owe to people of all ages with the talent to benefit from higher education.



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# Forgotten Learners: building a system that works for mature students



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# Executive Summary

This report highlights the importance of undergraduate mature students in higher education institutions across the United Kingdom, with particular reference to modern universities.

**In 2012, the MillionPlus and NUS report *Never too late to learn*, celebrated mature students in higher education.<sup>1</sup> This report builds on the findings of that report and provides an analysis of changes that have occurred to the mature student population in recent years.**

In 2017, MillionPlus commissioned a survey targeted at undergraduate students aged 21 or over. This survey was sent to mature students across all domiciles of the United Kingdom. Participation represented a wide range of institutions, with 2,805 respondents in total. Students were asked to answer around fifty questions on a series of subjects relating to their experience as a mature student: personal characteristics; application to university/college; finance; student support; accessibility; difficulties; overall reflections.

In addition to the survey, MillionPlus member institutions hosted a series of focus groups in late 2017. Participants were able to shape and guide the conversation in this setting, and this approach granted a more subjective insight into mature students' lives, the challenges they face, and reflections on their experience. The findings of both the survey and the focus groups are referenced throughout this report and have helped shape its recommendations.

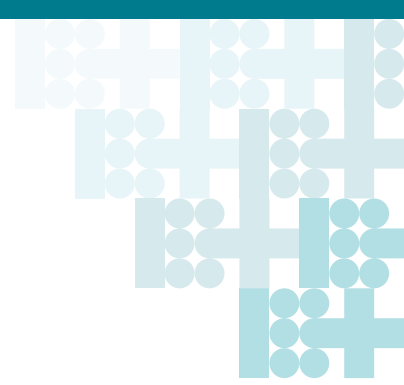
Analysis of different bodies of data reveals a worrying decline in the number of mature students in the UK. The total number of UK mature students declined by 20%, falling from 1,030,565 in the 2011/12 academic cycle, to 818,550 in 2016/17.<sup>2</sup> This covers all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and masks considerable variation between different sections of the mature student population of the UK.

The research finds that the decline in mature students has been heavily concentrated at English universities in both relative and absolute terms. There were 122,060 fewer mature entrants in higher education in England in the 2016/17 academic cycle than there were in 2011/12, a 42% fall in the undergraduate population aged 21 or over.

Across all domiciles, three areas have been identified in which the decline in mature students has been most heavily concentrated: those studying part-time; the "30 and over" age group; and those studying "other" degrees. "Other" undergraduate degrees refer to those courses of study that lead to a qualification at level 4 or 5; an honours degree is at level 6. As such, other undergraduate courses – foundation degrees, HNCs, HNDs – are vitally important in both addressing the skills needs of individuals and businesses, and providing students with opportunities to progress to a full degree.

1 MillionPlus & NUS, *Never too Late to Learn* (2012)  
[http://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/Never\\_Too\\_Late\\_To\\_Learn\\_-\\_FINAL\\_REPORT.pdf](http://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/Never_Too_Late_To_Learn_-_FINAL_REPORT.pdf)

2 Higher Education Statistics Agency, data taken from student information tables 2009/10 to 2016/17



Between the 2009/10 and 2016/17 cycles, the number of students fitting all three of these criteria dropped by 70% in the UK. The research also shows how the decline in mature student numbers has disproportionately affected certain courses that have traditionally catered for high numbers of mature students.

Nursing is a particular area of study that has been adversely affected by a reduction in mature student numbers. Between 2009/10 and 2016/17, the number of part-time nursing students over the age of 21 has fallen by 49%. This is one clear example of where there is a relationship between mature student numbers and the provision of public services (and, by extension, societal wellbeing).

In recent years, mature students have been recognised increasingly in universities' Access Agreements. This is a move in the right direction. However, analysis of Access Agreements calls into question the substance behind many of these commitments, and the extent to which universities and colleges are judged on whether they meet their targets in these areas. OFFA's own analysis of these Access Agreements has shown that commitments toward mature students across the whole sector are not currently sufficient to counter the scale and pace of the decline in older learners.

As the Office for Students establishes itself and takes shape from April 2018, there needs to be a discussion across the sector on how universities can more effectively retain and attract mature students. Not enough has been done to secure the participation of mature students, especially in the wake of significant declines in their numbers in the last decade. Funding remains a barrier to many, and the massive drop in part-time applications demonstrates a worrying trend of missed opportunities.

Modern universities undoubtedly have a key role to play in any such agenda. In this report, we focus on some of the cultural, social and economic arguments for a healthy mature student population in the UK, which merit the attention of those both inside and outside of the sector.

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**Between 2009/10 and 2016/17, the number of part-time nursing students over the age of 21 has fallen by 49%.**

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# Recommendations

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## GOVERNMENT SHOULD:

- Review student finance to assess whether there is adequate financial support for those with the lowest household incomes.
- Improve the financial support available for mature students so that those who are most disadvantaged are not having to rely on high levels of paid employment to maintain themselves financially, thereby damaging their ability to progress at university.
- Restore maintenance grants for students in England through the Student Loans Company so that mature students are not discouraged from entering higher education due to maintenance costs and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do not graduate with greater levels of debt.
- Further relax the equivalent and lower qualifications (ELQ) restrictions for some 'second-chance' learners.
- Establish a system of tuition fee loan write-off for nursing and midwifery students in England (post-2016) after a minimum period of public service e.g. 5 years. This will help combat problems with both recruitment and retention in these professions.
- Maximise the flexibility of learning options in higher education so that mature students are not discouraged from going to university. Move to a more flexible system that allows students to tailor their study to the pace of their life makes university education feasible for those with existing commitments. This must be replicated on the level of funding, to create a system in which mature students do not have to commit to a full year's worth of financial and personal commitment.

## THE OFFICE FOR STUDENTS SHOULD:

- Prioritise mature students as a key target demographic within the widening participation agenda.
- Use its powers as a regulator to secure meaningful, sustained and stretching commitments from universities in their Access & Participation Plans in relation to mature students.
- Encourage and incentivise universities to design effective approaches to mature student recruitment and to expand funding for that recruitment and for financial support.

## UNIVERSITIES SHOULD:

- Further improve engagement with mature students to acknowledge their diversity and establish places/opportunities on campus for mature students to meet each other, particularly those in similar age brackets.
- Continue to provide flexible routes into higher education.
- Ensure there is adequate support for students with caring responsibilities, so that these do not act as a barrier to entry or completion.
- Avoid any changes to term timetables that may increase childcare costs for mature students.
- Be bold in targets and ambitions outlined in Access and Participation Plans relating to mature students.
- Promote the range of support (financial or otherwise) that is available to mature students.

## Definition of a mature student

A mature student can be defined most generally as somebody who embarks upon Further or Higher Education aged over 21. For the sake of consistency with most of the literature on mature students, this will serve as the default definition of a mature student in this report unless otherwise stated.





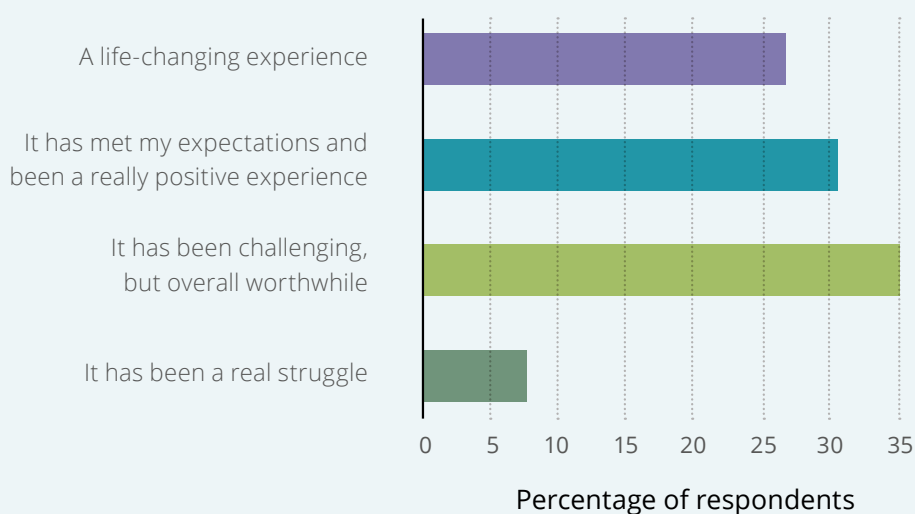
# Modern universities leading the way in mature student experience

Modern universities have been at the forefront of providing a quality student experience for mature learners for many years. They have led the way by developing innovative programmes and initiatives designed to maximise engagement with older students, who have traditionally shown a tendency to be more isolated on campus. Through our research into the mature student experience, we have found that, in spite of the challenges that they face, mature students are highly positive about their decision to go to university. **Figure 1** shows that when we asked students to summarise their university experience, 92% of those surveyed responded positively and over a quarter described it as a “life-changing” experience.

Mature students are highly positive about their decision to go to university. When asked 92% responded positively and over a quarter described it as a ‘life-changing’ experience.

[VIEW HELEN VIPOND INTERVIEW\\* >](#)

**Figure 1:** Assessment of time at university



Source: MillionPlus mature student survey

\*If reading in hardcopy please refer to the MillionPlus website to view the video – [www.millionplus.ac.uk](http://www.millionplus.ac.uk)

The majority of mature students describe their experience in positive terms and comment on how it has advanced their careers and/or personal development.

In focus group discussions, mature students commented on how the experience of university had advanced their careers and/or personal development. Some made specific reference to how their university experience had expanded their perspective and understanding of the world, while others commented on how the learning process had strengthened their belief in themselves and their ability to achieve.



### CASE STUDY: STEP UP TO HE AT STAFFORDSHIRE UNIVERSITY

The Step Up to Higher Education programme is a part-time, accessible academic programme for mature students who are looking to progress on to a range of courses at Staffordshire University. 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. The previous two cohorts have produced over a hundred students on undergraduate programmes at the university who began their education journeys through Step Up to HE. These students are training to be the paramedics, social workers, lawyers and games designers of the future.

The course situates itself in helping students develop and underpin the key academic skills required for degree level study whilst also having an emphasis on developing each learners’ self-efficacy in a higher education environment. While on the course students receive practical and professional advice on a one-to-one level. Both the teaching and pastoral support experience on the programme have had a positive impact on student confidence, supporting the improvement of student retention results across the university.

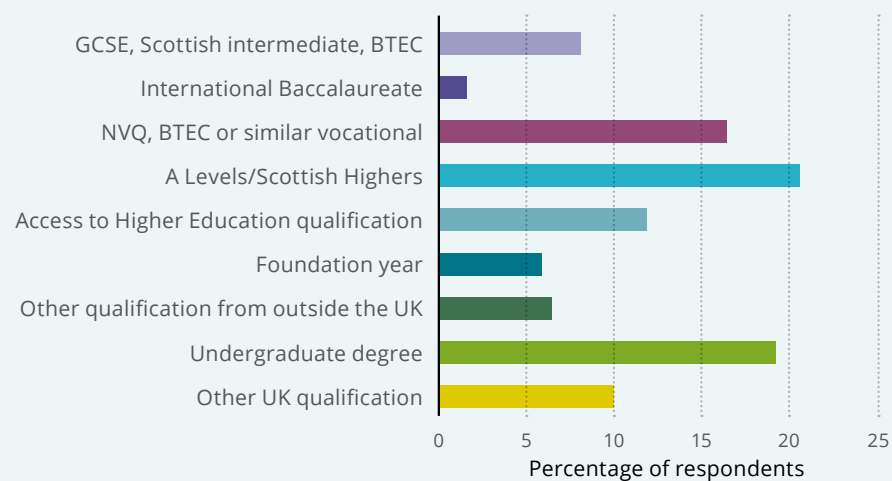


# The diversity of mature learners

Mature students represent a very heterogeneous group. This presents challenges to government and universities in understanding the population of mature students both nationally and at individual institutions. The definition of a mature student means that there can be as much as 70 years in the age differences of study cohorts. Around 20% of the mature students that responded to the survey were aged 21-25 years old, whereas a quarter were aged 40 years or older.

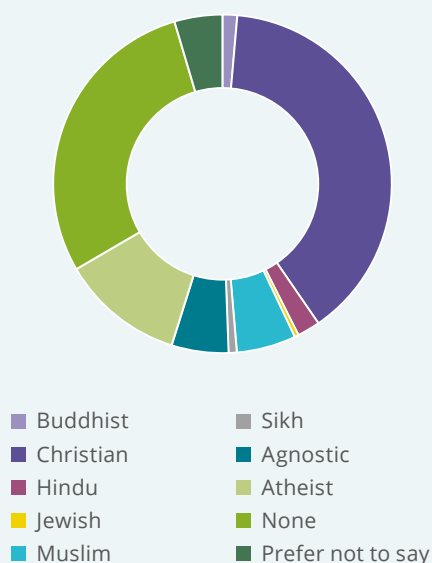
As shown in Figures 2 to 7, mature students represent a wide range of religions, races, educational backgrounds and, most notably, ages.

**Figure 2: Qualifications on entry of mature students**



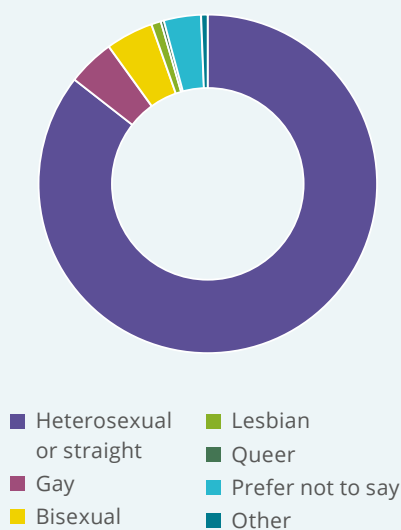
Source: MillionPlus mature student survey

**Figure 3: Religion, faith or belief of mature students**



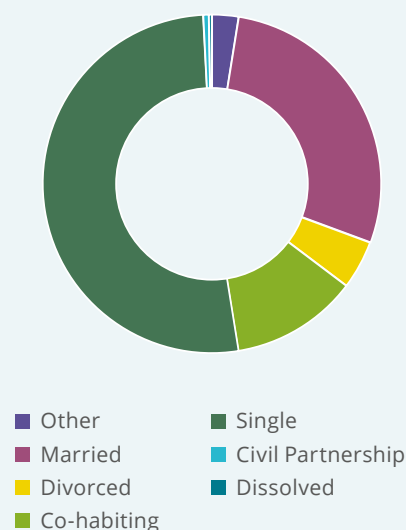
Source: MillionPlus mature student survey

**Figure 4: Sexual orientation of mature students**



Source: MillionPlus mature student survey

**Figure 5: Marital status of mature students**



Source: MillionPlus mature student survey

**Figure 6:** Ethnicity of students of mature students (excl. White English\*)



Source: MillionPlus mature student survey \*51% of applicants surveyed identified as White English. This graphic focuses on the ethnicity of the other 49% of respondents.

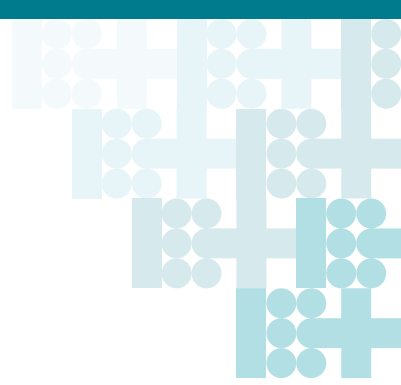
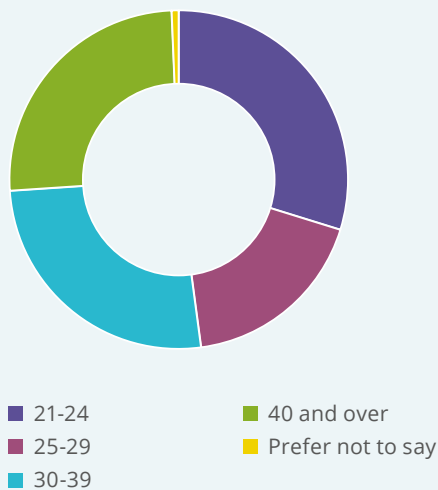


Figure 7: Age of mature students



Source: MillionPlus mature student survey

Figure 7 shows the breakdown by age of the mature students surveyed, with respondents evenly distributed across the different age brackets.

This chart highlights a fundamental problem in the categorisation of mature students as a group. Mature students are primarily defined by what they are not, i.e. they are not school leavers taking the immediate next educational step to study at university between the ages of 18 and 21. This wide scope is one of the main reasons mature students represent such a heterogeneous group, as shown in the graphs and charts above.

This can present a challenge for those in the sector trying to engage specifically with mature students. For example, support mechanisms or academic opportunities that are designed for such a diverse group can sometimes lack direct appeal to individuals. Some focus group participants commented on how this loose definition, and the large age range that it covers, can make it harder for universities to engage with mature students. Mature students we spoke to commented on this, saying:

"... there are definitely tiers within mature students"

"I'm not sure you can actually group mature students all in one"

"... I don't consider somebody under 30 a mature student"

"There are three generations of mature students"

Some commentators have challenged the traditional definition of mature students, distinguishing those aged 21 to 24 as "young mature" and 25 and over as "older mature".<sup>3</sup>

With a growing tendency for young people to take time out before university to work or travel, this extra filter may be necessary in some instances. But such distinctions are not limited to the purposes of research. Universities and students' unions could benefit from more targeted engagement with different sections of their mature student populations. This has the potential to allow them to "tap in" to more isolated parts of the mature student body.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Smith, *Mature Learners: a synthesis of research* (Evidence Net: Higher Education Academy, 2008)

### CASE STUDY: MATURE STUDENTS GETTING AHEAD AT ABERTAY UNIVERSITY

Abertay University is committed to providing educational opportunities for mature learners, who make up around 22% of the student population. There are currently more than 900 students over the age of 25, with 371 aged 25 to 29, 169 aged 30-34, 139 aged 35 to 39 and 223 aged over 40. Many mature students come to Abertay through the Access to Higher Education at Abertay Dundee (AHEAD) programme – a part-time evening programme providing access to a wide range of degrees. AHEAD is for anyone who has been out of education for three years or more and doesn't have sufficient qualifications to gain entry. It provides core academic and study skills necessary to successfully complete a higher education degree at Abertay. Many mature students move into Abertay through a college route, often with direct entry to second or third year of an undergraduate degree. This process is known as articulation within the Scottish system and provides a useful alternative route into higher education for many students, particularly those wanting to study later in life.

The survey results show that mature students value the opportunity to meet up with other mature students at university. When asked how their overall student experience could be improved, 24% said the opportunity to meet up with other mature students was one of the main ways in which this could be achieved. This theme was echoed in the focus groups, where students remarked that this can help avoid feelings of isolation and low confidence.

The diversity of mature students can present difficulties for universities in their engagement with mature students. Events or programmes that are designed for the full range of mature students have to appeal to what were referred to as the different “tiers” or “generations” of students all at once. This is not an easy task. However, universities and students have reported to us that those events or programmes that are targeted at a narrower age bracket of adult learners have shown themselves to be more effective.

In addition, having some form of online platform (forum or social media page) in which mature students can interact exclusively with each other was also identified as an effective tool for improving mature student experience. This can be led through a club, society or department. Most importantly it creates a space in which mature learners can interact with each other and discuss topics (academic or not) that does not require a heavy level of commitment.

### Key points

- Mature students reflect a wide range of individuals with varying personal and educational backgrounds
- Mature students identify different “generations” of mature students within the umbrella definition.

“Do you know who encourages me more than anyone? ... the mature community here [at university] ... I’m the first person in my direct family to go to university.”

“I think there’s that level of empathy. You feel as if there’s been someone else there, in your shoes, and you’re not quite alone.”

“It’s not so much about activities, it’s about having somebody there.”

“You need that network.”

### RECOMMENDATION

Further improve engagement with mature students to acknowledge their diversity and establish spaces/opportunities on campus for mature students to meet each other, particularly those in similar age brackets.

# The commonality of mature students

## Mature students represent a diverse and varying demographic group.

However, we can still identify some common characteristics among them. These recurring themes can shape the student experience and create obstacles or challenges to the learning process. Research has shown the most notable of these are:

- extra financial burden
- caring responsibilities
- paid employment
- motivation
- choice of institution and type of residence<sup>4</sup>

## CARING RESPONSIBILITIES

Caring responsibilities are a common feature of mature student life, with 29% of those we surveyed stating they had children or adults dependent on them in some capacity. Mature learners have to manage these commitments in and around their contact hours, while at the same time organising time for independent study. Some universities provide childcare facilities on campus, which can be of great use to those with young children to look after. However, the costs of paying for childcare should not be underestimated.

Many institutions have traditionally organised reading weeks for courses to try and coincide with school holidays that take place during the academic term (e.g. half-term).

However, an increase in the financial burden of childcare was raised as a concern in the focus group discussions. Reasons given by participants were the uneven distribution of school holidays across different schools and local authorities, the reorganisation of university calendars and the removal of reading weeks on certain courses.

As mature student numbers have shrunk, it is likely that the weight of the mature student voice has also diminished on some campuses. It is advisable, therefore, that administrations fully consider the implications of any changes to course or term structure in future and provide the appropriate support for those who need it if changes are to be made.

[VIEW HELEN VIPOND INTERVIEW\\* >](#)

## RECOMMENDATION

Universities should ensure that there is adequate support for those students with caring responsibilities, so it does not act as a barrier to entry or completion.

Universities should avoid changes to term timetables that may increase childcare costs for students.



<sup>4</sup> MillionPlus mature student survey

\*If reading in hardcopy please refer to the MillionPlus website to view the video – [www.millionplus.ac.uk](http://www.millionplus.ac.uk)

### CASE STUDY: MATURE STUDENTS COMING ON LEAPS AND BOUNDS AT UNIVERSITY OF BOLTON

At the University of Bolton over 54% of our students are mature learners. We have a very diverse student profile and understand that our mature students juggle their studies with other equally important commitments such as part-time work, children, family and caring responsibilities. We have developed several interventions, in consultation with mature students, to ensure that we not only acknowledge the challenges that they face but also support them to integrate into campus life and our learning community.

Our mature learners bring significant work and life experience to their studies and we encourage them to draw upon this during their degree programme. Several are also returners to education. Our LEAP (Learning Excellence Achievement Pathway) programme offers students a blended learning development package with face-to-face LEAP workshops for returners and mature learners.

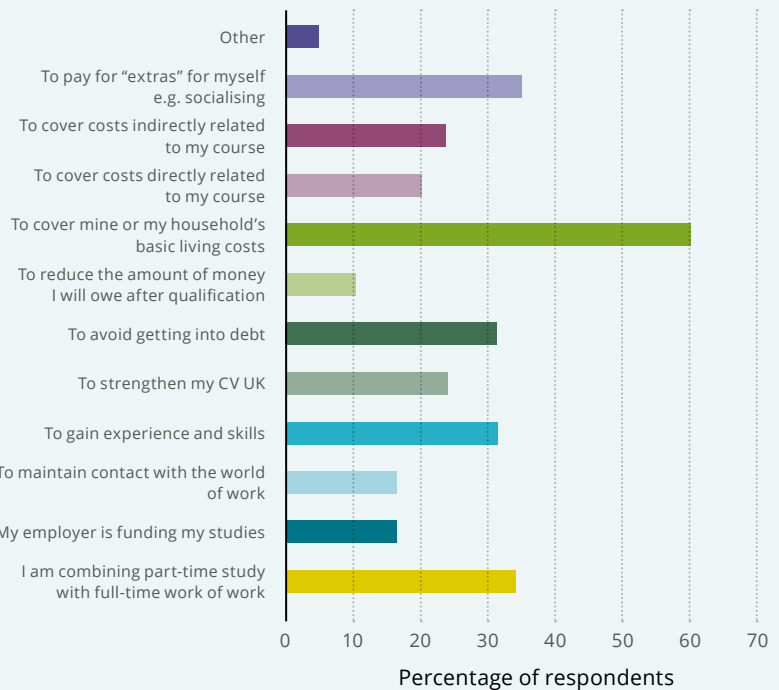
Our mature students also participate in Peer Assisted Study Support (PASS)

sessions, as both PASS leaders and participants, and make a significant contribution to our peer-mentoring scheme (as both mentors and mentees) which is accredited by the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation (MBF).

### PROFESSIONAL COMMITMENTS

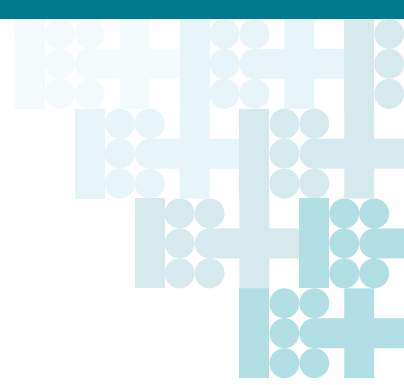
Of the mature students we surveyed, 70% were engaged in some form of paid employment while at university. In some cases, this employment served as useful experience that complimented their undergraduate study. However, for many mature students working outside of university is not a choice, but a necessity. **Figure 8** shows that the most common reason for mature students to be working is to cover basic household living costs, with 60% of survey respondents selecting this option. These findings were supported by focus group conversations, with some participants reporting a real difficulty making ends meet. Over half of the students we surveyed said they had experienced some form of financial hardship during their studies. We heard from one student union representative who reported an increase in the number of mature students using the union’s food services, sometimes as a consequence of delays in financial hardship money being processed.

**Figure 8:** Reasons for employment for mature students



Source: MillionPlus mature student survey





Working while studying is a common pattern for most students, regardless of age. For many, it is essential in order to meet living costs; for others it may be for additional expenditure. Regardless of the reasons for working, this inevitably means that students have less time available for independent study, which arguably has an impact on learning.

Research by Professor Tim Blackman, Vice-Chancellor of Middlesex University, has shown that there is negative correlation between having 17 hours or more of paid work and a students' learning gain.<sup>5</sup> A logical explanation for this is that an undergraduate degree often relies on high levels of independent study time. The more a student works beyond 17 hours, the more pressure is put on their studies.

Since mature students are on average more likely to work than those under the age of 21, they are disproportionately affected by the added pressure this brings. To illustrate this point further, 35% of mature students surveyed in our research said that a lack of time due to other commitments was a principal barrier to them accessing the physical learning resources at their institution.

## RECOMMENDATION

The government should improve funding for financial support that is available to mature students at university so that those who are most disadvantaged are not relying on high levels of paid employment to maintain themselves financially, thereby damaging their ability to progress at university.

## MOTIVATION

Another common feature we identified in mature students was a strong sense of drive or purpose in their study. Mature students have normally thought long and hard about the decision to go to university. While university might be an obvious next step for many school leavers, for mature students the decision is not so straightforward. This is because it can require significant sacrifices: giving up prospects of career progression in the short-term, reduction in spending power; restriction on free time outside of traditional working hours.

As a result, when they arrive at university, most mature students are heavily invested in the course they are studying and show exemplary levels of commitment to the learning process. Mature learners are assets to the learning environment, not only because they have an enhanced level of life experience to draw on in discussions and contributions, but also because they participate so actively and enthusiastically.

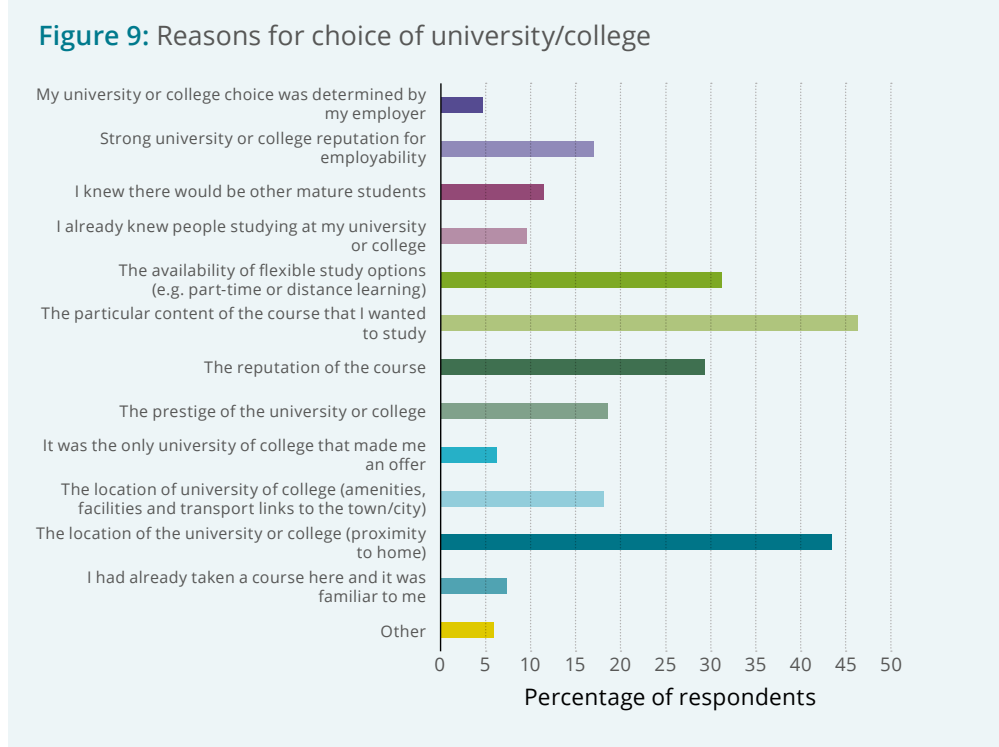
Those mature students that participated in focus group discussions could all articulate a clear goal they wanted to attain through their study, whether through the content of the study itself, or the opportunities unlocked with a given degree.

"I think because of experiencing life without higher education, you value more that when you do get into the job market you will not be at the bottom anymore, you're already five steps up."

"[Mature students] share a greater degree of direction"

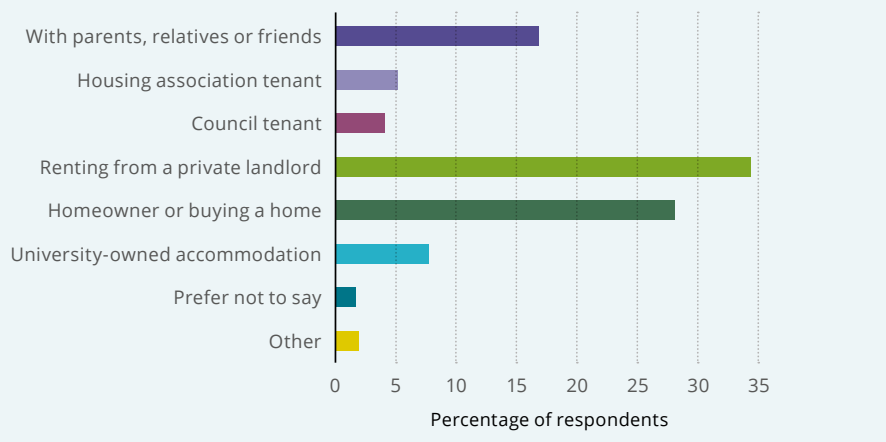
<sup>5</sup> Tim Blackman, What affects how much students learn? (HEPI Policy note 5: Higher Education Policy Institute, 2018)

It is also common for mature students to show interest in an area of specialisation within their course before they have begun their studies. Figure 9 shows that when we asked mature students what their motivations behind studying were, the particular content of the course was the most common response.



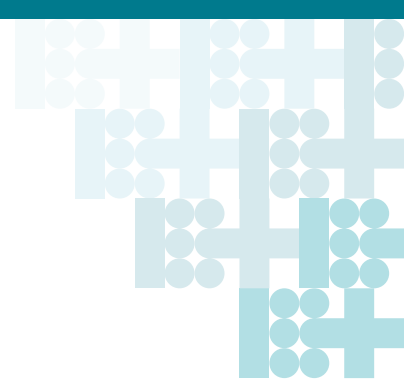
Source: MillionPlus mature student survey

**Figure 10: Where do mature students live?**



Source: MillionPlus mature student survey

Figure 10 shows that 28% of respondents were homeowners or buying a home and 16% living with family, relatives or friends. These circumstances show that many mature students have limited flexibility in relation to where they can study. In addition, those mature students paying off a mortgage have an added financial burden, which is fixed over time. This is far less common for younger learners who nevertheless have their own financial constraints.



## CHOICE OF INSTITUTION AND TYPE OF RESIDENCE

Responses to our survey show that most mature students tend to apply to fewer than five institutions at once, in contrast to school leavers. In fact, 45% of the mature students we surveyed said they had only applied to one university or college.<sup>6</sup> To put this into perspective, three quarters of all UCAS undergraduate applicants applied to five institutions in 2018, and 93% applied for more than one.<sup>7</sup> This suggests that mature learners tend to be, on average, more selective in their choice of institution. This selection is sometimes determined by existing commitments, because mature students are usually more anchored in their local community or region than an 18 or 19 year-old. This means that the location of the provider (i.e. the local offer) is of great importance to them. This is supported by the data presented in [figure 9](#), which shows that 43% of the students surveyed said that the location of the university

or college was one of their principal reasons for picking that institution. This affirms the importance of local providers in widening participation to higher education.

Mature students are much less likely to reside in university accommodation than younger learners. [Figure 10](#) shows that only 7% of the students we surveyed lived in university-owned accommodation. It is also worth bearing in mind that while many mature students are strongly rooted in their local community or region, this does not guarantee proximity to campus. Over 30% of respondents in our survey said they lived more than 20 miles away from campus. The ‘commuter’ student is an increasingly common feature of many universities, with some reporting more than 50% of their student population falling into this category.<sup>8</sup>

In face-to-face conversations with mature students, it was made clear to us that living off campus is seen as a disadvantage. Some mature students

commented that they sometimes felt “out of the loop” on certain developments and opportunities that were taking place on campus. Students felt their time on campus was limited by other commitments. In addition to this, 35% of mature students highlighted their distance from campus as a primary limitation on their ability to access the physical learning resources of their institution, such as the IT suite, library, laboratory or research equipment.<sup>9</sup>

“Universities like ours are locally based. We are about the local community. We are getting into areas of people that wouldn’t dream of accessing higher education.”

## Key points

- Mature students exhibit many common characteristics or circumstances in their life, which can present challenges to the learning process at university
- Excessive levels of professional employment as a student can encroach on study time and damage progression in higher education
- Many mature students have caring responsibilities which can limit the time they have for independent study and create extra financial burden, which is not always fully accounted for in current funding models
- Mature students tend to dedicate much time and thought to researching the course they are going to study and show a marked level of drive and commitment to the learning process
- Mature students are not as mobile as their younger counterparts: their choice of institution is often limited by existing commitments. They are less likely to live on campus and often see this detachment from the student community as a disadvantage.

6 MillionPlus mature student survey

7 Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, 2018 cycle applicant figures

8 Liz Lightfoot, Commuter students: locked out, left out and growing in number (The Guardian Newspaper, Higher Education: 2018)

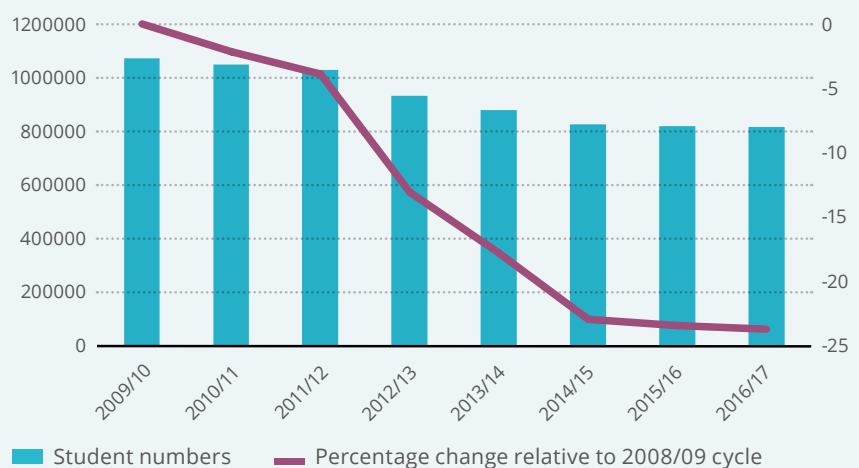
9 MillionPlus mature student survey

# The decline in mature students

In the 2016/17 academic cycle, mature students still made up 46% of undergraduate students at all higher education institutions across the whole of the UK.

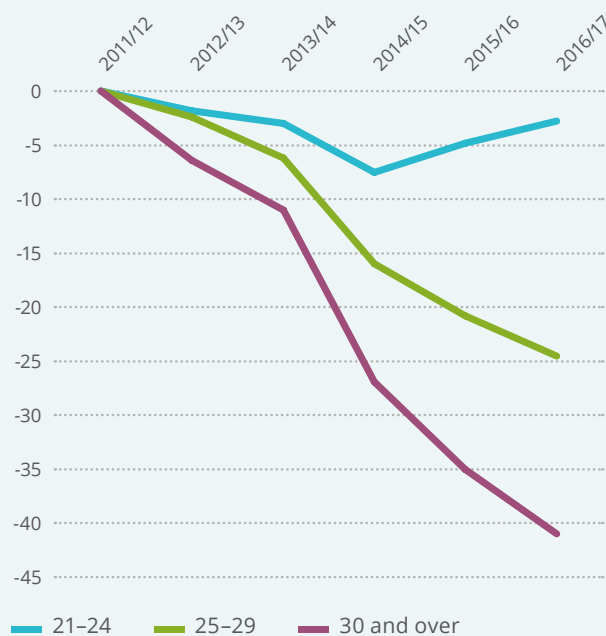
Within certain parts of the sector, such as modern universities, the concentration of mature students is particularly high. Mature students, therefore, are clearly a significant proportion of the student population and deserve considerable attention from policymakers.

**Figure 11:** Number of mature students at HEIs in the UK



Source: HESA student data

**Figure 12:** Percentage change in the number of mature students by age



Source: HESA student data

The total number of mature students in the UK has been in decline for several years, and seems likely to continue based on data from the UCAS 2017 end of cycle report. **Figure 11** illustrates this, showing a reduction of 23% in overall numbers since 2009/10. The steepest decline can be seen between 2011/12 and 2014/15. In fact, during this period the total mature student population in the UK fell by 203,670. This means that, in the course of just three academic cycles, this section of the student body was reduced by 19%. This graphic gives a good overview of student numbers, but is very broad in its scope, and covers institutions of varying size, specialism and location. To better understand this decline, we must focus our analysis to create a more detailed picture of where mature student numbers have been falling.

**Figure 12** shows that, in terms of age, the greatest degree of decline has taken place amongst those mature students aged 30 and over, whose numbers have reduced by 41% since 2011/12. This is followed by those aged 25 to 29, whose numbers have fallen by 25% since 2009/10. As the graph shows, the numbers of those students aged from 21 to 24 years old has only decreased by 3% over the past few years. All this suggests that there has been a relationship between age and student numbers amongst mature students. It also reinforces the idea mentioned earlier in this report that, to better understand mature students, it is advisable to distinguish them by age group.

10 Higher Education Statistics Agency, data taken from student information tables 2009/10 to 2015/17  
 11 UCAS, End of cycle report 2017

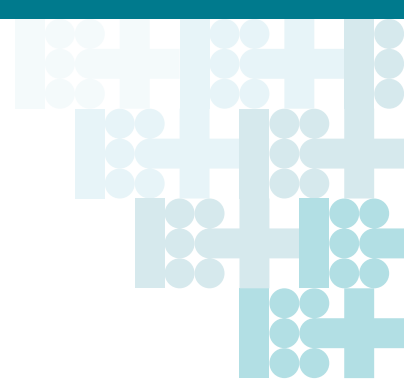
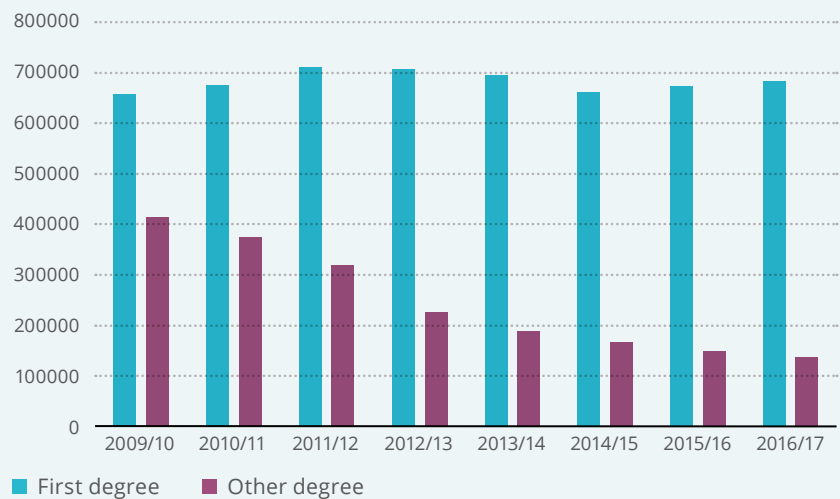


Figure 13 shows why it is also worthwhile considering the type of degree that mature students study. There is a clear divergence in the data when you separate out those mature students that are, or have been, studying first degrees compared to those studying “other” degrees. Other degrees refer to those qualifications taken at higher education institutions that are not undergraduate degrees or postgraduate qualifications. Examples of this are foundation year programmes, HNCs and HNDs.

**Figure 13: Change in mature student numbers in the UK by degree type**



Source: HESA student data

In the 2009/10 cycle, there were 413,925 mature students studying other degrees. By 2016/17, this number had fallen to 135,775, representing a reduction of 67%. The total number of mature students studying first degrees has not shown such a consistent pattern of decline. For first-degree mature students, the only period of decline was between the 2011/12 and 2014/15 academic cycles, where numbers fell by 7%. This equates to a drop of 50,600 students.

It is clear from Figure 13 that there has been a much steeper rate of decline among those carrying out other degrees in recent years. This observation is important, because “other” degrees are progression routes into undergraduate degrees. As previously stated, mature students have a wide range of educational backgrounds and display a diverse range of qualifications on entry. Other degrees such as Higher Nationals and Foundation degrees, have been a very popular route into undergraduate study for mature students. The drop

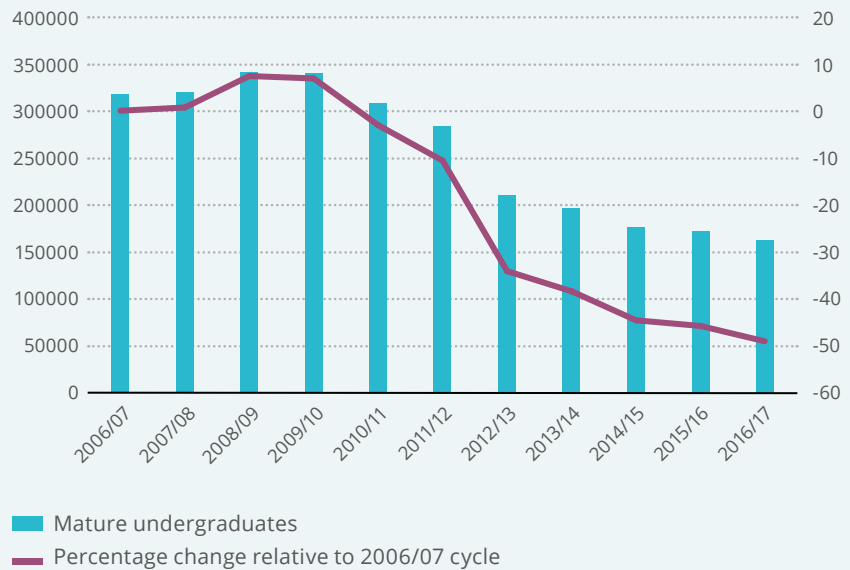
in those studying other degrees therefore does not just have a direct impact on mature student numbers at higher education institutions, it will also have repercussions on the numbers of mature students studying undergraduate degrees in the mid-to long-term. Other undergraduate degrees include the level 4 and 5 qualifications that will contribute to filling the skills gaps identified by government and businesses, so the declines in these courses will have significant, long term detrimental effects on the economy.

## ENGLAND

Figure 14 shows the fluctuations in undergraduate mature student entrants to HEIs in England over a ten-year period from 2006/07 to 2016/17.<sup>12</sup> The graph shows that the decline has been concentrated in the latter half of this timeline. In the 2008/09 academic cycle, the number of mature student entrants in England peaked at 370,940. In comparison, there were 162,865 mature undergraduate student entrants in 2016/17, a drop of 50%. From the 2011/12 cycle we have seen a 42% drop in mature entrants to undergraduate study.

The greatest single drop in mature student entrants during this period came between 2011/12 and 2012/13, when £9,000 tuition fees were introduced in England, with 80,880 entrants.

**Figure 14:** Change in the number of mature entrants (undergraduate) to HEIs in England



Source: HESA data on Performance Indicators: Widening Participation

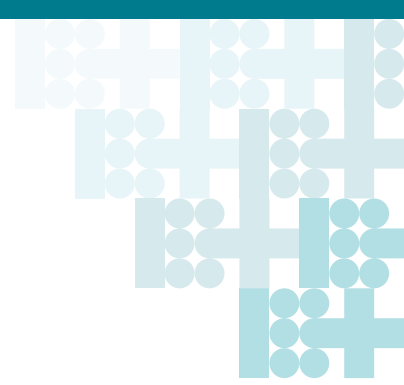
## SCOTLAND

Due to the sheer volume of English institutions within the UK sector, the figures from England can dominate the picture and mask the reality of other domiciles in the UK. Figure 15 (page 23) shows how the overall numbers of mature students have differed in Scotland. In the 2006/07 cycle, mature students numbered 130,930 in Scotland, whereas in 2015/16 their total was 117,780. While there still has been a net decline in the number of mature students over the period, this is much smaller in comparison to that which has taken place in England. Since Scotland represents fewer institutions, and by extension fewer students, we are looking at a smaller reduction in mature student numbers in both relative and absolute terms.<sup>13</sup>

If we break this data down by the type of degree, we can see a much clearer picture of what is going on in Scotland. Figure 16 (page 23) shows a clear divergence between the numbers of mature students studying either first or sub-degrees. There has been a significant decline in the number of mature students studying sub-degrees in Scotland, dropping by 37% from 66,360 in 2006/07 to 41,595 in 2015/16. In contrast, the number of first-degree undergraduates has risen by 18% since 2006/07, from a total of 64,570 in 2006/07 to 76,185 in 2015/16.

<sup>12</sup> HESA data, UK performance indicators: Widening Participation 2005/2006 to 2016/17

<sup>13</sup> Scottish Funding Council, data taken from HE Students and Qualifiers 2015-16 Tables



**Figure 15:** Change in the mature student numbers in Scotland



**Figure 16:** Change in the mature student numbers in Scotland by type of Degree



## Key points

- Mature student numbers across the UK have declined significantly over recent years
- The major declines have occurred in learners aged 30 years and over
- There have been significant decreases in the number of students studying 'other' undergraduate degrees (e.g. qualifications such as HNCs and HNDs) that serve as both opportunities to increase skills and enable progression
- The fall in mature students has been more pronounced in England. Numbers peaked in 2008/09, but the sharpest decrease was after 2012
- Scotland has seen a net decline in mature student numbers in recent years. However, a drop in the number of people studying sub degrees has been the principal influence.

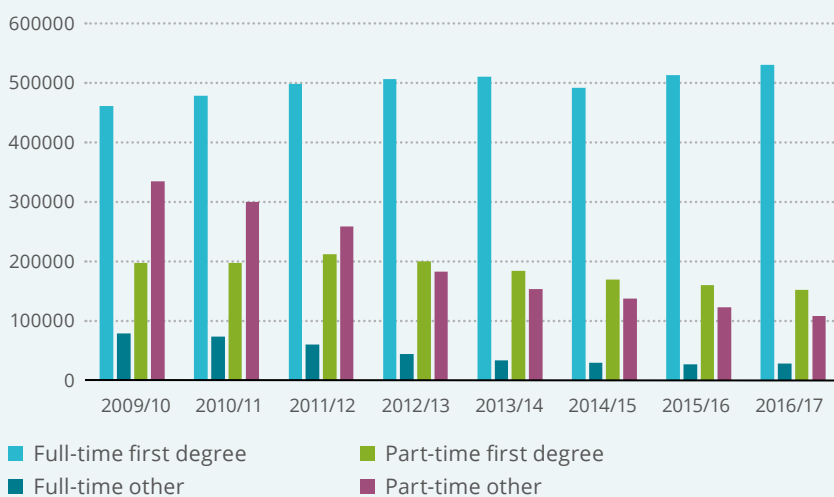
Source: Scottish Funding Council student data

# Mode of study

## PART-TIME

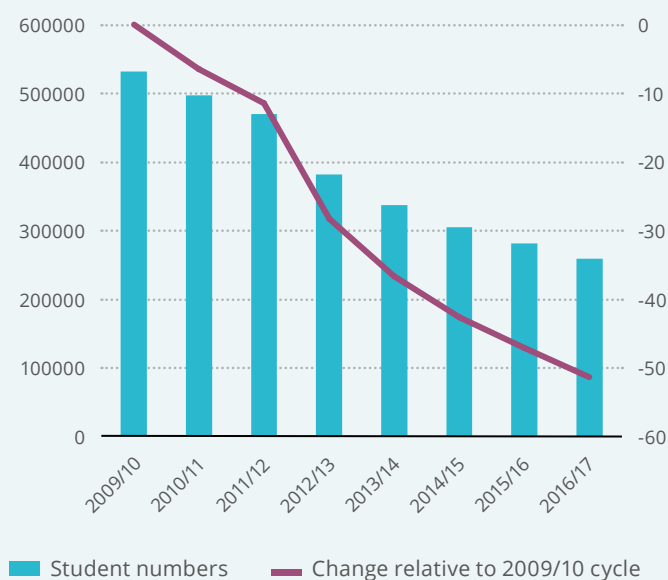
It is important to consider the mode of study of mature students as overall patterns differ from younger learners. Traditionally, a much higher proportion of mature learners have studied part-time than younger learners. In 2016/17, part-time students accounted for 32% of the overall mature population, compared to 44% back in 2011/12.<sup>14</sup> **Figure 17** breaks down mature student numbers into the different categories based on mode of study and degree type. This shows that of these four categories, the decline has been most concentrated amongst those studying “other” undergraduate degrees part-time.

**Figure 17: Change in mature student numbers by type of degree**



Source: HESA student data

**Figure 18: Part-time undergraduate mature student numbers in the UK**



Source: HESA student data

Part-time students have always been a vital component of the mature student body across the UK. **Figure 18** shows the worrying decline in part-time mature students across the whole of the UK in recent years, with a 51% decrease in numbers since 2009/10.

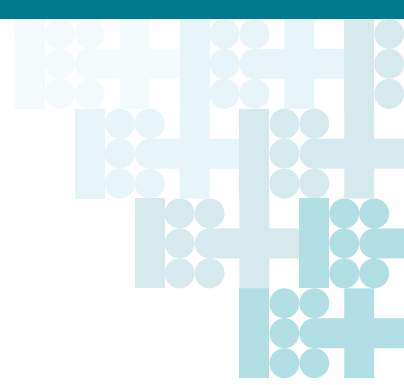
In England, there has been an especially steep drop in mature student numbers. The data show a 69% drop in the number of mature students studying part-time in the decade shown on **Figure 19** (page 25), falling from 238,890 in 2006/07 to 78,880 in 2016/17.<sup>15</sup> The decline in this demographic predates the large-scale changes made to fees and funding in England. The reforms to remove funding from equivalent and lower qualifications (ELQ)<sup>16</sup> – meaning that students who needed a ‘second chance’ to retrain faced new and significant barriers – had huge impact. There has been some relaxing of these rules to allow students to study certain STEM subjects, but the main barriers remain. These have disproportionate negative impacts on both part-time and mature students.

<sup>14</sup> HESA data, Students 2009/10 to 2016/17

<sup>15</sup> HESA data, UK performance indicators: Widening Participation 2005/2006 to 2016/17

<sup>16</sup> HEFCE, *Withdrawal of funding for equivalent or lower qualifications (ELQs)* (HEFCE Policy Guide; 2015)





However, as [Figure 19](#) also demonstrates, the scale of reduction has been most pronounced since the introduction of £9,000 fees. The graph shows that the largest single reduction in part-time mature entrants (indicated by the steepest gradient on the graph) was the year when the new fee system came into effect. This resulted in a fall of 64,800 students between the 2011/12 and 2012/13 academic cycles.

It is impossible to treat mature students and part-time students as separate entities. In order to understand one, you must consider the other. For example, in the 2016/17 academic cycle, 94% of UK domiciled part-time students were 21 or older. Much work has already been done to analyse the dramatic reduction in overall part-time numbers.<sup>17</sup> These analyses share similar conclusions: while it is clear there are multiple factors at play, the changes in fees and funding in England have significantly influenced the

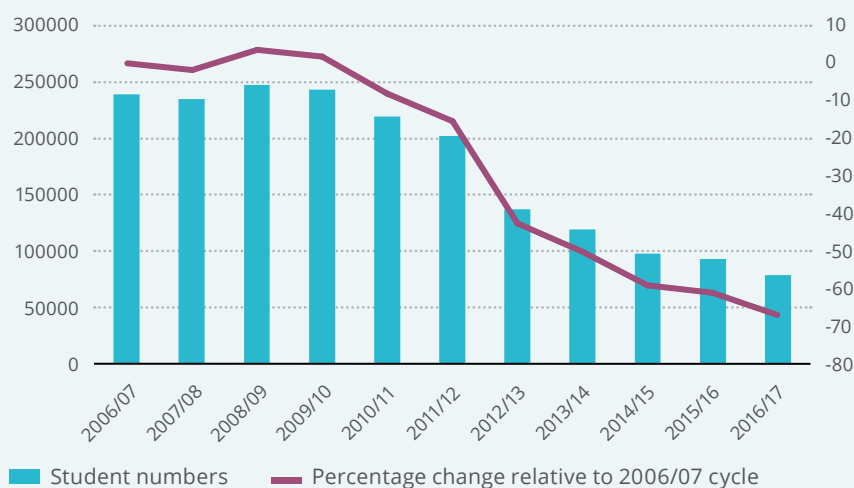
drop in part-time study. However there has been much less attention given to the age dynamic linked to this. Why, then, focus on mature students?

To put it simply, most part-time students study part-time because they are mature, and not the other way around. When we talk about the huge added-value they bring to the student community, we cite their rich and varied life experiences. These characteristics are defined by age rather than by mode of study. Why is this important? Policymakers should not lose sight of the reasons why we need a healthy mature student population at university. Part-time study is vital in offering many students the flexibility they need to juggle other commitments with university life. But when crafting new policy, our starting point should always be the reasons why this flexibility is required.

## Key points

- The fates of part-time and mature students are highly intertwined since such a high proportion of part-time students are over the age of 21
- Part-time mature student numbers have plummeted in recent years. This trend precedes changes to fees and funding in England, with the ELQ reforms playing a major part. However, the rate of decline has been noticeably increased since the fee level changes
- Part-time study allows mature learners the opportunity to access higher education while managing other commitments such as work and caring responsibilities. It therefore plays a huge role in supporting progression and social mobility.

**Figure 19:** Change in the number of part-time entrants (undergraduate) in HEIs in England



Source: HESA data on Performance Indicators: Widening Participation

<sup>17</sup> Butcher, J. (2015). Listen to part-time learners and smart policy will follow. In HEPI, *It's the finance, stupid! The decline of part-time higher education and what to do about it* (HEPI Policy Note pp. 48-56)  
 Vieru, S. (2015). It's all about the money, money, money. In HEPI, *It's the finance, stupid! The decline of part-time higher education and what to do about it* (pp. 42-47)  
 Open University, *Fixing the broken market in part-time study* (2017)

It is impossible to treat mature students and part-time students as separate entities. In order to understand one, you must consider the other.

## ACCELERATED DEGREES

Accelerated degrees have been promoted as an alternative for those who are more restricted in their capacity to commit three years to an undergraduate degree. This may well offer a solution for some future mature students. However, this is not necessarily the answer for the majority of those looking to study later in life.

Firstly, accelerated degrees may not be available for all courses, nor at all institutions. As we have established in this report, mature students are often more rooted by place in their choice of university. The local university is the most, and in some cases the only, viable option for many mature students. So, if accelerated degrees are not available at a local institution, they will be largely irrelevant options for these potential students.

Perhaps most importantly, accelerated degrees do not offer mature learners the flexibility that many of them require. A significant proportion of mature students must fit in contact hours and independent study around existing family, professional or other commitments. For this reason, the intensity of study of an accelerated degree may be untenable. In order to appeal more to mature students, universities must develop ways of offering more flexible, rather than more rigid and compact study alternatives.

This particularly applies to the funding that is available to students. Currently, the system is structured around year-long loans for tuition and maintenance. A more flexible funding system could increase participation amongst mature learners who, more debt-averse than their younger counterparts, would be less intimidated by the heavy financial commitment of a year of study.

## Key points

- Accelerated degrees are an important part of flexibility provision, but they still require significant commitment from learners in terms of study time.
- Growing availability of accelerated degrees is unlikely to provide a solution for the majority of those looking to study in later life, who are looking for greater flexibility in the study options available.

## RECOMMENDATION

Government should further relax the ELQ restrictions for some 'second chance' learners.

Government should maximise the flexibility of learning options in higher education so that mature students are not discouraged from going to university. Move to a more flexible system that allows learners to tailor their study to the pace of their life and makes university education feasible for those with existing commitments. This must be replicated on the level of funding, to create a system in which mature students do not have to commit to a full year's worth of financial and personal commitment.

# Possible reasons for the decline in mature student numbers

## THE EFFECT OF WIDER ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

Changing economic conditions are sometimes used to explain fluctuations in admissions to universities in the UK. Job availability is sometimes offered as one variable that can affect school leaver's decision to go to university or not. Research from London Economics has argued that, for part-time students, income is a more important determinant in deciding whether to go to university.<sup>18</sup> This is because most people who are considering part-time study are already in employment. A low unchanging income is likely to act as a "push" factor for an individual to re-skill or up-skill at university.

As we have explained, part-time and mature students are two groups that are inextricably linked.

Indeed, those thinking of studying later in life are more likely to already be in employment than 18 to 20-year olds. They are therefore more likely to be "pushed" into higher education by little or no improvement in their economic situation. Since real wages in the UK have stagnated since the 2008 financial crash,<sup>19</sup> it is almost impossible to argue that wider economic conditions have been a primary cause of the decline in mature student numbers over the same period.

## STUDENT FINANCE

The marked difference between the data on England and Scotland would suggest that the respective funding arrangements north and south of the border are affecting mature student numbers differently. The findings from our survey and focus groups would indicate that mature students are on average more debt-averse than younger learners. This is in line with conclusions that were made in the *Never too late to learn* report by MillionPlus and the NUS back in 2012.<sup>20</sup>

Policy in recent years has arguably underestimated debt-aversion amongst certain demographics, including mature learners.<sup>21</sup> On this basis, we can make the assertion that the decisions of potential mature students in England have been influenced to a greater extent than their younger counterparts by the £9,000 tuition fee "ticket price".



18 Sophie Hedges & Dr Gavan Conlon, *How is the demand for part-time education affected by changing economic conditions?* (London Economics Report for The Open University, Birkbeck University and London South Bank University; 2017)

19 Office for National Statistics, Data taken from *Analysis of real earnings: January 2018*

20 MillionPlus & the NUS, *Never too late to learn* (2012)

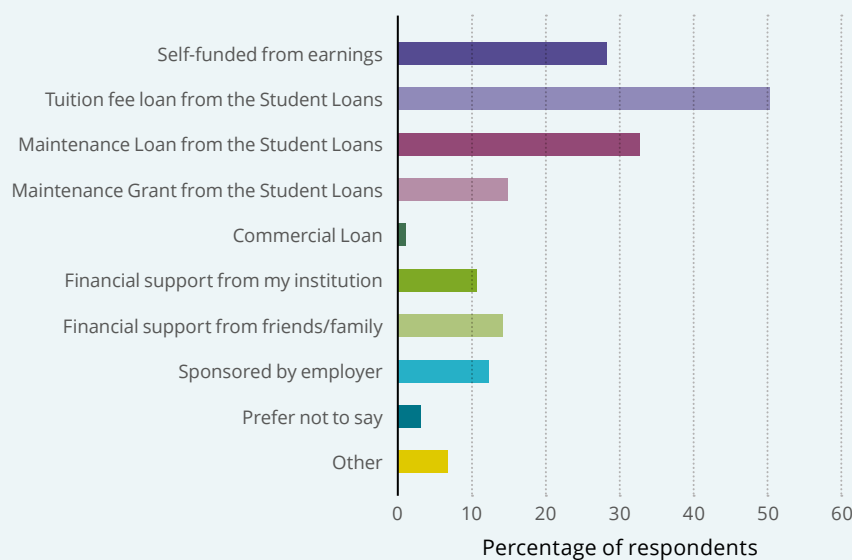
21 Vieru, S. (2015). *It's all about the money, money, money*. In HEPI, *It's the finance, stupid! The decline of part-time higher education and what to do about it* (pp. 42-47).

Universities UK. (2013). *The power of part-time: Review of part-time and mature higher education*.

Figure 20 shows that 28% of mature students we surveyed are self-funding part of their studies. In contrast, 49% of mature students responded this way in 2012.<sup>22</sup> This would support the idea that the capacity of mature students to self-fund their studies in England has been significantly reduced with the introduction of the new fee regime, thereby reducing mature student numbers.

Furthermore, Figure 20 shows only 10% of mature students to be receiving financial support from their institution, compared to 48% of respondents back in 2011. This is remarkable when you consider there are considerably fewer mature students today. This would suggest that the availability of financial support for mature students has been significantly reduced over recent years.

Figure 20: Sources of funding for mature students



Source: MillionPlus mature student survey

## Key points

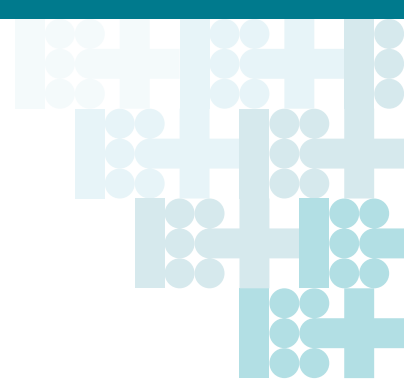
- Based on economic research into part-time student numbers, we can assume that economic conditions have not prompted the decline in mature student numbers
- The reforms to tuition fees and other funding (in England) have created new barriers to higher education for mature learners.

## RECOMMENDATION

The government should review student finance to assess whether there is adequate financial support for those with the lowest household incomes.

Universities should promote the full range of financial support options that are available to mature students.

<sup>22</sup> MillionPlus & the NUS, *Never too late to learn* (2012)



This report has underlined the fact that aspiring mature students will spend a lot of time researching the course they want to study. Indeed, the particular content of the course was shown to be the most important factor in influencing mature students' choice of institution in our survey. Discussions with mature students revealed that they also spend time researching the student finance system prior to university. Participants in focus groups displayed a good knowledge of the rate of repayment of student loans, the earnings threshold at which loans were paid back and the fact that student loan debt could not be passed on to children or relatives. Students cited these examples as reasons why they had not been "put off" university, emphasising maintenance costs as their principal financial preoccupation ahead of any future overhanging debt from tuition fees. One student remarked saying:

"Do you know what I'd say is more of a barrier: the maintenance loan."

These are the voices of students who have decided to go to university. It is of course possible that potential mature students have been averted by the introduction of £9,000 fees in England. Nevertheless, this does suggest that on average mature students have a better understanding of the complex system of student finance in England than direct school leavers. However, it does highlight the importance of 'money in the pocket' when considering the financial barriers to studying, regardless of age. The introduction of maintenance loans to replace grants has exacerbated these concerns.

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On average mature students have a better understanding of the complex system of student finance in England than direct school leavers.

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## Key points

- Mature students are more debt averse than younger students
- Smaller percentages of students are self-funding their degrees or receiving financial support from their universities
- Maintenance costs are identified as the main financial preoccupation of mature students.

## RECOMMENDATION

The government should restore maintenance grants for students in England through the Student Loans Company so that mature students are not discouraged from entering higher education due to maintenance costs and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do not graduate with greater levels of debt.

# The important contribution of mature students

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## SOCIAL MOBILITY, DIVERSITY AND LIFE-LONG LEARNING

There are several reasons why increasing mature student numbers is of great importance. The first, which we have already touched upon, is diversity. In order for universities to be properly representative of the society that exists outside of campus, their students should reflect a range of ages. Research commissioned by OFFA in 2017 has shown that mature students are "... disproportionately likely to be from disadvantaged or under-represented groups, including current target groups such as students from the white working class, from specific BME groups and students with disabilities."<sup>23</sup> As a result of this, mature students must be an essential component of any agenda on widening participation or social mobility, not just because they represent a demographic group in and of themselves.

The ability to enter education later in life offers many the chance to expand their horizons, network with greater social capital and improve their economic situation. For some, this can even mean drawing themselves out of poverty. It is essential that any society with a goal of social mobility enables its citizens a "second chance" of learning. It is of course commendable that more eighteen-year-olds from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are going to university.<sup>24</sup> But it would be unwise to draw a cut-off point for widening access after the age of twenty.

No government or education system will ever ensure that everyone makes the right decision at 18. Pressures outside of the classroom inevitably limit the life choices of many teenagers. We therefore need an education system that offers people the chance to engage with learning opportunities later in life.

The narrative on widening participation and social mobility in higher education has arguably focused too exclusively on 18, 19 and 20-year olds in recent years, to the detriment of potential adult learners. To put this into perspective, from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, the number of mature students in the UK doubled.<sup>25</sup> By this point, most universities considered their widening participation agenda to be "synonymous" with that of mature students. But in the late 1990s universities began to focus increasingly on participation of younger students from more disadvantaged backgrounds. In short, the reduction in mature student numbers is a recent phenomenon. Worryingly, in the current economic climate, there is arguably a greater need than ever before for mature students and the opportunities delivered through life-long learning.

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It is essential that any society with a goal of social mobility enables its citizens a "second chance" of learning.

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## ECONOMIC BENEFITS

There are also very strong economic arguments for ensuring that higher education remains firmly open and attractive to all age groups. This country currently faces a serious skills gap in certain sectors of the economy. This threatens holding back regions and communities across the UK, stalling meaningful growth and hampering the UK's competitiveness in a globalised economy.

It has been estimated that the skills gap could cost the UK economy £90bn by the year 2024.<sup>26</sup>

The skills gap at levels 4, 5 and 6 has been highlighted as particularly problematic, and much government policy announced in 2017 had a focus on long-term solutions to improve participation at levels 4 and 5. Consequently, universities must be at the heart of any attempt to address this shortage of skills, whether this is through the provision of traditional degrees, or new degree apprenticeships.

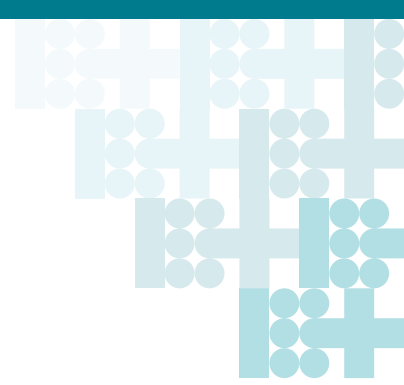
Many mature students will be applying for university or college to up-skill in a field in which they are already working, or have professional experience. And for many others, the motivation for study will be a desire to re-skill for a new career path, either out of ambition to change their lives, or through necessity e.g. redundancy.

23 Office for Fair Access and the Open University, *Understanding the impact of outreach on access to higher education for adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds: an institutional response*, (OFFA and Open University report in coordination with University of Bristol, University of Leeds & Birkbeck University, 2017; page 3)

24 Universities and Colleges Admissions Service statistical release, data taken from *Daily Clearing Analysis 14th September 2017*

25 Judith Smith, *Mature Learners: a synthesis of research* (Evidence Net: Higher Education Academy, 2008)

26 Local Government Association, *Work Local: Our vision for employment and skills* (2017)



## CASE STUDY: GARY WALLER – FULFILLING A PERSONAL AMBITION, UNIVERSITY OF SUNDERLAND



Before going to university, I served for seven years in the Royal Engineers as a plant operator, then 12 years at Nissan working on the production line, and 10 years working as a taxi driver. But I always had bigger ambitions, which I was able to realise at the University of Sunderland. I decided to attend university to prove something to myself. I left school with few qualifications and I also wanted to improve my job prospects.

While at Sunderland I applied for a part-time job at Liebherr through the University's Careers and

Employability Service. Effectively I started to work for Liebherr while I was in my second year at Sunderland, and now I am the Logistics Manager. I would recommend enrolling onto a degree programme to anyone who has a desire to educate themselves and improve their career prospects. In fact, I've encouraged members of my own family to go to the University of Sunderland in order to fulfil their potential. Some of them are now graduates or current students at the university themselves.

This is particularly pertinent in the current economic climate, where the ability of the workforce to re-skill or up-skill will be essential, irrespective of the post-Brexit scenario. For the UK economy to compete and thrive after leaving the European Union, it must invest and grow in new and emerging technologies. Due to the scale and pace of change of these technologies, there will be a need for many adults to train in these areas to keep up with developments in the world of work.

In the 2016/17 cycle, for example, 41% of all computer science undergraduate students were aged 21 or over.<sup>27</sup> There is little doubt that this sector will develop rapidly in the future with advancements in the capacity of software and the development of specific research areas such as artificial intelligence. It is of great importance, therefore, that undergraduate study remains attractive to potential older learners in order to at least maintain these numbers. For UK businesses and UK universities to remain competitive in these fields, there will need to be a significant increase in the number of skilled graduates in the computer sciences. Mature students will have to play a key role in this.



27 HESA data, students 2009/10 to 2016/17

## CONTRIBUTION TO THE WIDER LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The desire and drive of mature students in their study path can often be strongly influenced by their own life experience (the case study of Stephen Gazely is a perfect example of this). University staff regularly report that the life experience of mature students is enormously beneficial to their classes. Furthermore, lecturers and tutors often report that when the mature students build upon their extended life experience in discussions, presentations, and other forms of groups work, younger students also gain from a richer learning environment.

The wider societal benefits of higher education are limited when participation is monopolised by one generation. Recent media comment on the university sector has shown a distinct lack of emphasis on the wider societal benefits that the higher education sector delivers. These comments are arguably part of a wider political and media trend of prioritising the participation of 18 year-old school leavers; a trend that has largely ignored the sustained period of decline in both part-time and mature students.

The referendum on European Union membership in 2016 exposed divides in opinion across the UK along lines of geography and age. In fact, research has shown university education to be the “predominant factor” dividing the characteristics of remain and leave voters.<sup>28</sup> Higher education certainly can play a role, therefore, in helping to foster stronger intergenerational bonds in the UK after Brexit.

## CASE STUDY: STEPHEN GAZELY – FROM RECOVERY TO A PHD, STAFFORDSHIRE UNIVERSITY



In March 2010, I entered a rehabilitation facility to tackle an addiction problem that had begun when I was 14 years old. As my recovery progressed I became determined to replace my addiction with something far more positive, and in January 2011 I began evening classes on a counselling course and attended the Step-Up to H.E. course at Staffordshire University.

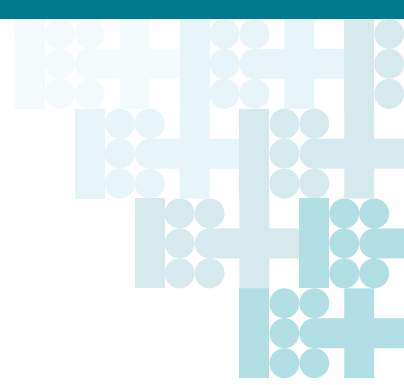
In September 2011, I began a Sociology-based course entitled Crime, Deviance and Society (BA) and graduated with a 2:1 (with honours). I then searched for an appropriate Masters course, which reflected my research thoughts and ideas, and in September 2016 began an MSc in Public Health (Addictions) at Liverpool John Moores University. At the same

time, I joined New Beginnings, a group of voluntary, former service-users that work with individuals in a detoxification unit based at the Harplands Hospital.

I now also hold positions on the Service User and Carers Council, the Research and Development Steering Group, and the Directorate for Substance Misuse within the North Staffordshire Combined Healthcare Trust, as well as having an involvement with the City of Culture 2021 bid. I am currently working on my dissertation, which centres around a Social Evaluation of the Importance of Peer Support in Recovery, and have a clear idea of research I wish to undertake at PhD level.

28 Aihua Zhang, *New Findings on Key Factors Influencing the UK's Referendum on Leaving the EU* (2017) World Development 102 (Elsevier; 2018, pages 304–314)





## Key points

- Maximising participation of mature students in higher education is a fundamental element of widening participation and increasing social mobility in society
- There are clear wider economic benefits of having a higher education system that is open to mature students. Some of the key economic challenges of the future could be unlocked through a greater number of people being able to train and develop later in their life
- Mature students enrich the learning environment on campuses across the university as they bring extensive life experience.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Office for Students should prioritise mature students as a key target demographic within the widening participation agenda.

The Office for Students should use its powers as a regulator to secure meaningful and sustained commitments from universities in their Access & Participation Plans in relation to mature students.

Universities should encourage mature students to study at university by providing flexible routes into higher education.

## WHAT UNIVERSITIES ARE DOING TO WIDEN ACCESS FOR MATURE STUDENTS

OFFA has analysed the Access Agreements of institutions across the UK and concluded that 145, or 70%, of the 207 Access Agreements in 2018-19 include access activity aimed at mature students. This is a roughly the same as was found for 2017-18 Access Agreements, with 71% of institutions displaying a commitment to conduct access activity aimed at mature students. While it is positive that over two thirds of institutions acknowledge the need to incorporate mature students into the widening participation agenda, there is clearly more work to be done. This distinction covers those institutions with any level of commitment in their Access Agreements and covers programmes and initiatives that are aimed at multiple target demographics, of which mature students are one.

In other areas of support for mature students, universities are shown to be less ambitious. Only 24% of 2018-19 Access Agreements are shown to include progression activity aimed at mature students. When you consider the extra pressures outside of university that are common features of mature student life, as outlined in this report, it would seem appropriate that this be given more attention by most institutions. It is clear then that significant year-on-year increases in areas such as these are to be expected if the sector is to achieve the “step-change” that the Director of Fair Access has called for.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, some would argue that there should be greater scrutiny placed on how substantive the commitments to mature students are within Access Agreements as well as on the outcomes of said commitments. Reflecting on the 2015/16 Access Agreements, OFFA identified the lack of progress in relation to mature students as a “grave concern”.<sup>30</sup>

The funding system, including the introduction of directing fee income to access activities, has focused on outreach and retention of younger learners – those continuing to higher education directly from school at the age of 18. There has not been nearly as much attention focused on the needs of mature learners, despite the obvious declines in participation over the last decade. Beyond laments, action to address these declines has been limited.

Where universities have had a focus in this area, it has often been secondary to a focus on young learners, and by their own assessments not always successful.

It is important, therefore, that the new universities regulator uses its capabilities to ensure universities are ambitious in any commitments made in relation to widening access to mature students. Secondly, universities need to be properly incentivised to fulfil these commitments and held to account where and when they do not achieve their aims.

29 Rachel Hall, *Les Ebdon: We need a step change on widening access to university* (The Guardian, Higher Education network; 2017)

30 Office for Fair Access, *Outcomes of Access Agreement monitoring for 2015-16* (OFFA; 2017)

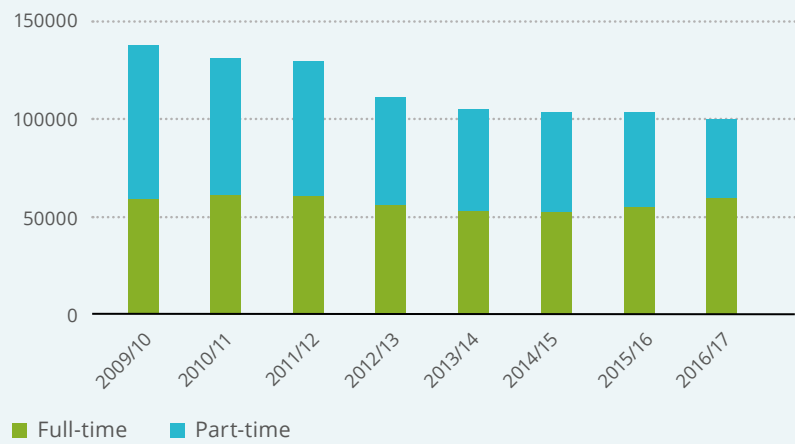
## NURSING

Modern universities have for many years been at the forefront of educational provision in the allied health professions. Nursing is one area where there has traditionally been a high proportion of mature students. The NHS has relied on the ability of universities and other providers to recruit older students in order to be sufficiently staffed in these areas. For example, UCAS reported that in the 2016-17 applicant cycle one sixth of all mature applicants applied for nursing courses.<sup>31</sup> Figure 21 shows the developments that have occurred in relation to the number of nursing students over the age of 21. Overall numbers have fallen by 28% since the 2009/10 academic cycle, while the number of part-time nursing students has fallen by 49%.

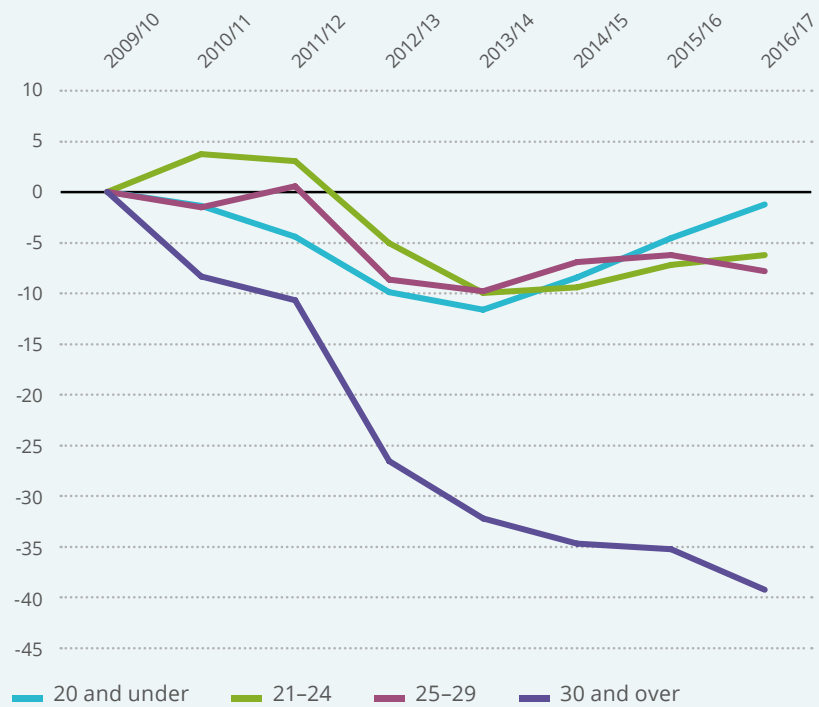
As stated, Nursing is a field of study that has a long history of attracting high numbers of mature learners. If we look at the breakdown of different age groups for nursing undergraduates, as shown in Figure 22, we can see that the decline has been largely concentrated among the “30 and over” cohorts.

Nursing students aged 30 and over are more likely to display the common characteristics of mature students that were highlighted earlier: extra financial commitments such as a mortgage; family commitments such as childcare; existing professional commitments. This, in turn, makes them likely to be debt-averse, and offers some explanation to why numbers for this age category have dwindled in England since 2012. The abolition of NHS bursaries, and replacement with student loans, will also have exacerbated this decline. The full impact of this policy decision is arguably still yet to be felt.

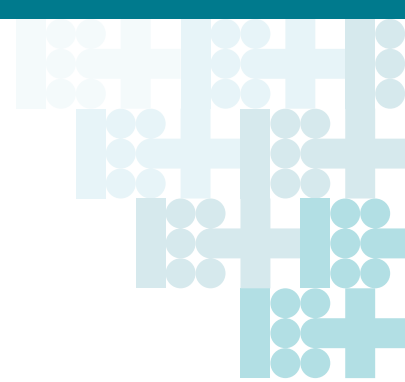
**Figure 21:** Change in the number of undergraduate nursing students in the UK by mode of study



**Figure 22:** Percentage change in the number of nursing undergraduate students by age



<sup>31</sup> UCAS End of Cycle Report 2017 (2018)

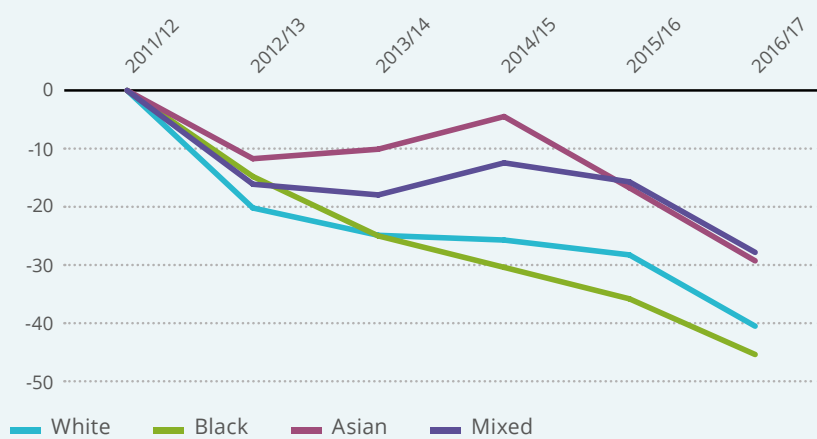


It is also worth considering other demographic changes to the nursing population in recent years. For example, in 2011/12, 9% of part-time nursing students identified as Black. This was a higher proportion than for most courses in the UK, with only 5% of students across all courses identifying as Black in the same year. There have historically been high levels of Black students (predominately women) studying nursing at modern universities in high density urban areas, particularly in greater London. **Figure 23** shows that since 2011/12, the number of part-time nursing students identifying as Black has fallen by 45%. This means that, whatever factors are driving the decline in part-time and mature nursing students, Black students appear to have been affected disproportionately.

All this comes at a time when nurses are needed more than ever in our society. Reports suggest that many hospitals are under-staffed in this area and are struggling to recruit sufficient numbers. NHS Digital has reported that between July 2017 and September 2017, there were 87,964 vacancy full-time equivalents in England. At the end of this period, the highest percentages of vacancies were found in the areas of nursing and midwifery.<sup>32</sup>

Brexit has the potential to add extra strain to these recruitment issues. Data released by the Nursing and Midwifery Council shows a drop of 94% between July 2016 and May 2017 in the number of trained Nurses from the EU joining the register for the first time.<sup>33</sup> The ability of universities, and in particular modern universities, to recruit nursing undergraduates will therefore be critical in the coming years.

**Figure 23: Percentage change in the number of nursing undergraduates by ethnicity**



**CASE STUDY: NURSING AT LONDON SOUTH BANK UNIVERSITY (LSBU)**

There is currently a shortage of around 30,000 nurses in England. It is critical that the widest possible range of people have the opportunity to study nursing, including mature students who wish to re-skill and up-skill to help ensure that the NHS has sufficient staff to continue delivering world-class patient care.

Across LSBU's School of Health and Social Care, which teaches Adult Nursing and Midwifery, Allied Health Sciences, Children's Nursing, Mental Health and Learning Disabilities, and Primary and Social Care, 70% of first-degree students entering last year, were mature.

The NHS Trusts we work with welcome this. As mature learners are typically less geographically mobile, they are often reflective of the communities in which they work. This makes them more likely to stay at the Trust in which they trained, despite the higher costs of living in London. Mature nurses are also more likely to work in parts of the NHS which are hard to recruit into such as mental health and learning disability services.

Many mature students however, have family and financial commitments which can make them unable to take on significant extra debt. As a result, the loss of NHS bursaries has seen a drop of more than 25% in over-25s applying for nursing courses.



32 NHS Digital, *NHS Vacancy Statistics England: February 2015 – September 2017 Provisional Experimental Statistics* (Government Statistical Service; 2018)  
 33 Nursing and Midwifery Council, *Report on EU Nurses and Midwives* (N&M Council; 2017)

### CASE STUDY: CASSANDRA PINNER – UPSKILLING FLEXIBLY TO ADULT NURSING, UNIVERSITY OF BEDFORDSHIRE



"I took A-levels when I was 18 and then did admin jobs. When I had my two children I worked with nurses at a children's centre and decided I wanted to become a nurse.

Initially I applied to the university to study children's nursing but didn't get in, so I did volunteering then paid work at our local hospital in Bedford. It was there I decided I wanted to study adult nursing. I applied for the three-year degree at the University of Bedfordshire and this time I got in.

At first it was overwhelming, studying full time with two children. I also have epilepsy. But there was quite a bit of flexibility around the course and the placements, which I managed to fit in around breakfast and after-school clubs. My mentors were fantastic.

There were plenty of other mature students on the course. In fact, we were a mixture of younger and older students, from all sorts of backgrounds, and we all got on really well.

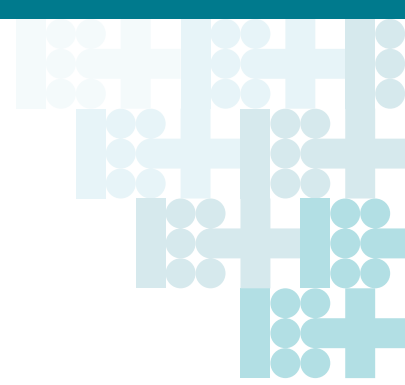
My final placement at a GP surgery prepared me for the role as a Practice Nurse and after graduating I got a job in a nearby medical practice. The course changed my life. I love my job and couldn't imagine doing anything else."

### Key points

- Nursing is one area that has been hit hard by a reduction in the number of mature students
- The number of nursing students who are aged 30 and over or that identify as Black has decreased disproportionately in recent years
- This has serious long-term implications for the public service provision in the medium to long-term and the wellbeing of society.

### RECOMMENDATION

Government should establish a system of tuition fee loan write-off for nursing and midwifery students in England (post-2016) on the condition of a minimum period of public service e.g. 5 years. This will help combat problems with both recruitment and retention in these professions.



# Conclusion

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The performance of UK higher education on increasing access and widening participation is often held up as a success story.

**More young people than ever before are attending university, and the number of those from disadvantaged backgrounds entering higher education continues to increase. Government, policymakers and universities rightly applaud these improvements.**

However, it is important to see this in context and acknowledge the contrasting performance of efforts to increase access and widen participation for older learners. The focus of reforms over the last ten years have been on how to improve the system for 'traditional' school-leaver learners who study away from home full-time for three years.

The picture for mature and part-time learners is very different. There have been steep and significant declines in the number of both mature students and part-time learners studying at university, particularly in England where there has been the most amount of reform – in fees, funding arrangements and student number deregulation.

The impacts of these declines are disastrous, both for the ability of mature students to access higher education opportunities and for employers to support their workers to improve and develop their skills. This has negative consequences for social mobility and productivity – two major planks of the government's policy agenda.

Mature students have for too long been the forgotten learners of the higher education system. The time has passed for the yearly lament when application and entrant numbers are published. Concern is not enough; action is vital. The inception of the Office for Students should be seen as an opportunity to rocket-boost activity to engage with and support mature students, to achieve the step-change long demanded.

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Mature students have for too long been the forgotten learners of the higher education system ... concern is not enough; action is vital.

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## MillionPlus Mature Student Survey

MillionPlus commissioned the NUS to help coordinate a nationwide survey targeting undergraduate mature students. This ran between 30th October 2017 and 10th January 2018. Before completing the survey, respondents were asked to confirm:

- that they were aged 21 or over
- that they were studying for an undergraduate degree
- that they were aged 21 or over when they started studying their qualification

Participants were asked up to 56 questions, and directed according to the answers they made on a few specific questions. The survey received 2,805 responses in total.

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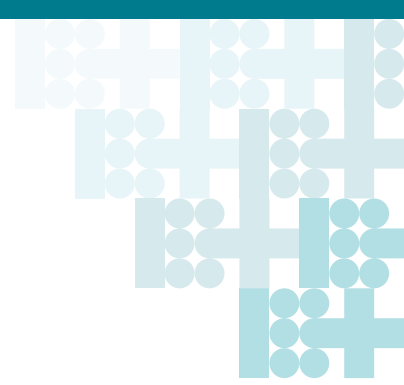
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