

Never Too Late To Learn

Mature Students in Higher Education

A million+ and NUS Briefing

It is a little known fact that nearly one in three undergraduates at UK universities are over the age of 21 when they start their first degree. That it is possible for people of all ages to go university, study a subject they are interested in and progress is a unique strength of the UK higher education system and one that should be protected, preserved and promoted.

Myths and Realities

The *Never Too Late To Learn* report by million+ and National Union of Students challenges a number of long-standing myths about who participates in higher education in the UK.

- **Myth 1: There are hardly any mature students.**
There are more than 429,000 mature undergraduates currently studying for first degrees at UK universities. Mature students add richness and depth to the UK student body and bring a wealth of experience to higher education as well as the drive and determination to succeed.
- **Myth 2: Mature students only study at The Open University & Birkbeck.**
Mature students make up at least 10 per cent of the undergraduate body at all but 21 UK universities and at some – mostly modern – universities, mature students comprise the majority of first-degree undergraduates. The expansion of opportunities has been driven by modern universities that share a real commitment to social mobility.
- **Myth 3: Most mature students already have degrees.**
Contrary to popular belief the vast majority (89.5 per cent) of mature students do not already have first degrees.
- **Myth 4: All mature students all study part-time.**
Mature students are much more likely than their younger counterparts to study on a part-time basis and the overwhelming majority (85.5 per cent) of part-time students are mature. However the majority of mature students (57.6 per cent) in 2009-10 were in fact enrolled on a full-time basis.
- **Myth 5: Mature students only study vocational subjects.**
Mature students are more likely to study vocational subjects such as education, subjects allied to medicine, computer science and architecture but mature students study the broadest possible range of available subjects.



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Key Findings

- **Mature students are deeply appreciative of the opportunity to go to university for the first time.** Mature students relish expanding their knowledge, mastering new skills, meeting new people and being able to access new opportunities after graduating and the vast majority (93.4 per cent) characterise their time in higher education positively.
- **Mature students are diverse but as a cohort they are more likely to have certain characteristics that place them within a framework of social mobility.** Compared to their younger peers, mature students are more likely to have non-traditional qualifications, to apply to just one university or FE college, to study part-time and locally, to be juggling study and family responsibilities, to be from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups and to have disabilities.
- **For mature students higher education represents a fantastic opportunity but can also pose some significant challenges.** These include balancing study with other commitments (highlighted by 83.0 per cent of survey respondents), financing higher education (69.4 per cent) and picking up new or relearning old study techniques (53.7 per cent).
- **Mature students are likely to suffer financial hardship while studying.** Amongst survey respondents 62.7 per cent report suffering financial hardship at least to some extent, 26.9 per cent have applied for discretionary funding, 25.8 per cent have taken on commercial debt and 48.6 per cent receive institutional support (e.g. bursaries) to fund their studies.
- **There appear to be some challenges around attainment.** In 2009-10 mature students were slightly more likely than young students (13.2 per cent) to obtain first-class honours but less likely to obtain 2:1s and more likely to graduate with third-class and unclassified degrees.
- **Mature students are also less likely to complete their studies.** Rates of non-completion of higher education courses are twice as high for mature students as for younger students. The main reasons cited by mature students who have considered suspending their studies (33.6 per cent) or leaving their course altogether (21.5 per cent) are the difficulties of balancing study with other commitments and financial problems.
- **There are no significant demographic differences between mature students who have considered leaving their course early and those who have not.** However there are differences relating to experiences of higher education: early leavers are less likely to be satisfied with the information they received when applying, less likely to report having been offered study skills support or peer support, less likely to feel involved in university or college life, less likely to have positive relationships with staff and other students, and more likely to experience financial hardship whilst studying.
- **It is important not to overstate these challenges.** The vast majority of mature students complete their studies, obtain good degrees and go on to a broad range of successful careers. The expansion of opportunities for students who have taken a less direct route to university or college is a unique strength of the UK higher education system and one that should be supported.
- **The new higher education funding regime in England may pose a threat to mature student participation.** UCAS has recorded a significant fall in applications from mature students for full-time courses starting in 2012-13 and the planned withdrawal of direct public funding in 2013-14 for individuals aged 24 or over who wish to study for Level 3 qualifications runs the risk of reducing progression into higher education over the longer-term.

Key Recommendations

- Mature participation in higher education should be recognised, valued and celebrated. Government, universities, further education colleges, students' union officers and teaching and support staff have a collective responsibility to promote the achievements of this often-overlooked cohort of students and to maximise both opportunities for and contributions by mature students.
- Mature students should be considered as a widening participation group whose participation supports social mobility by the Funding Councils and OFFA. Access regulations should take into account mature participation and the Widening Participation Premium (Student Opportunity Fund) should be maintained in perpetuity.
- The National Scholarship Programme should be replaced with a scheme that genuinely supports participation of students from less advantaged backgrounds whatever their age.
- The impact of higher education policies in England including 'core and margin' student number regulations, the introduction of full-fee loans at Level 3 for those aged 24 or over and the new part-time higher education loans arrangements which limit access to part-time loans to those studying between 25-75 per cent intensity should be reviewed in light of their potential detrimental impact on mature student participation. Age should be taken into account when equality impact assessments are undertaken.
- BIS should invest real resource in a national publicity campaign designed to reach mature and part-time students that challenges the myth that higher education is only for younger people and effectively communicates details of the new student support system.
- Public and institutional sources of information about higher education should take into account the different ways that mature students use information.
- 'Value added' should be seen as a legitimate measure of degree outcome and the HESA Performance Indicators group should ask interested stakeholders to put forward ideas about how distance travelled can be measured and articulated. At the same time, higher education institutions should monitor mature student degree attainment to ensure that it does not reflect a culture of systematic disadvantage.
- HESA should report annually on the number, mode of study and locations of mature students studying first degrees at UK universities.

About

The joint million+ and NUS research involved analysis of data provided by the Higher Education Statistics Agency, a survey of 3,963 mature students from around the UK undertaken by million+ and NUS in November 2011 and a series of workshops for mature students and university staff held during March and April 2012. We would like to thank the mature students, graduates, university staff, students' union officers and staff, and external stakeholders who shared their stories, views and experiences during the research process.

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