

Government, universities and student unions should work together to support and extend opportunities for mature students

Pam Tatlow presents new research into the difficulties faced by mature students in higher education. She argues that measures must take into account the scale of mature student participation and seek to promote rather than ignore it.



If politicians, policy-makers and the press were to be believed, students in UK universities are overwhelmingly young, middle-class and progress to university with A-levels straight from school with only the occasional gap-year in between.

Contrary to these common perceptions (or mis-perceptions as it turns out), many universities and student unions report a very different picture. This is why the university think-tank million+ and the NUS collaborated on a research project to identify the realities but also explore the myths about the scale and scope of mature student participation in the UK. Launched in the House of Commons on 23 May, *Never too late to learn* provides a robust evidence base and calls into question policy and funding regimes that assume that university is just for young people.

Our research confirms that one in three undergraduates (over 429,000 students in 2009-10) commence study at university for the first time when they are over 21. Mature students make up at least 10 per cent of the undergraduate body at all but 21 UK universities. At some – mostly modern – universities, mature students comprise the majority of first-degree undergraduates. This expansion of opportunities has been driven by modern universities and makes a rarely acknowledged but significant contribution to social mobility.

The idea that the majority of mature students study at the OU or Birkbeck part-time or that they already have degrees are also myths that need to be set aside. The vast majority (89.5 per cent) of mature students do not have first degrees. While they are much more likely than their younger counterparts to study on a part-time basis, over 57 per cent of mature students studied on a full-time basis. The commonly held view that mature students only study vocational subjects is also inaccurate. Mature students study the full range of available subjects.

The researchers interrogated official statistics, analysed responses from almost 4,000 mature students and convened workshops open to mature students from all UK institutions. They were left in no doubt that mature students are deeply appreciative of the opportunity to go to university for the first time to expand their knowledge, master new skills, meet new people and access new opportunities after graduating. The vast majority (93.4 per cent) of mature students characterise their time in higher education positively – a tribute not only to their own achievements but also to the universities where they study.

The report concludes that 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 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, financing higher education and acquiring new or relearning old study techniques.

Mature students were likely to suffer financial hardship while studying and are more debt averse.

Amongst survey respondents 26.9 per cent had applied for discretionary funding and 48.6 per cent received institutional support (e.g. bursaries) to fund their studies. Significantly the students surveyed entered university under the current £3000 fee regime rather than the fee and student support system that will be introduced in England from 2012. This will trigger fees of up to £9000 but also fee loans for part-time study although part-time students will still not be eligible for maintenance loans.

There also appear to be some challenges for universities and students around attainment. While mature students were slightly more likely than young students to obtain first-class honours, they were less likely to obtain 2:1s and more likely to graduate with third-class and unclassified degrees. They were also more likely not to complete their courses. However, 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.

There are some clouds on the horizon. UCAS has recorded a significant fall in applications from mature students for full-time courses starting in 2012-13. The student numbers market introduced in England values younger students with high A-level grades more highly than mature students and the universities where they study are losing student numbers. The government's plan to replace all direct public funding for Level 3 qualifications for individuals aged 24 with an FE fee loan from 2013-14 also risks reducing progression into higher education over the longer-term.

So what next for government, universities and student unions? First and foremost Ministers from all departments – including the Cabinet Office, Department for Business, Innovation, and Skills (BIS) and Department for Education (DfE) - should recognise that mature students are not an add-on but are integral to the student cohort in our universities. Funding, policy regimes and social mobility measures must take into account the scale of mature student participation and seek to promote rather than ignore it. Equality impact assessments should automatically include age.

BIS, DfE, Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), Office for fair access (Offa) and the funding councils and governments in Scotland and Wales should consider mature students as a widening participation group whose studies benefit individuals, support social mobility, enhance society and contribute to the economy.

'Value added' should be a legitimate measure of degree outcome and a national scheme devised to take account of the distance travelled by those who enter higher education with non-traditional qualifications. 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 and student unions should consider how their activities reflect the interests and needs of students of diverse ages.

Mature students are undoubtedly opportunists in the true sense of the word. Governments, universities and student unions should work together to support and extend opportunities in the future. In particular, ministers should demonstrate that it really is never too late to learn.

Never too late to learn is a million+ and NUS report which can be accessed [here](#)

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