

Enriching our understanding of the mature student experience

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Introduction

Studying at university is exciting and challenging for all students, it is a process whereby students develop and build identities (Laming et al, 2019). However, university education should not just be the preserve of eighteen-year-olds leaving full-time education from sixth forms and colleges. Mature students bring a richness and diversity to the higher education community, with a range of life experiences, which allow for a greater understanding of the world around us.

This research project explored how mature students felt about studying at the University of Warwick, what their journey was to get to university and their views on how we may better support them whilst they are here. Mature student numbers have been in serious decline over the past 10 years, with a 22 per cent drop in those entering higher education (OfS, 2020). Moreover, the devastating impact of the part-time fees in 2012 has decimated mature student parttime enrolment (70 per cent drop) (Fraser & Harman, 2019).

Mature students are more likely to be from diverse backgrounds, with research demonstrating that they are 'more likely to be female, BME, to hold non-traditional qualifications and to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds than young students' (NUS, 2012: 7). Students who are classed as mature are also more likely to drop out of their courses, and less likely to gain a 'good' degree classification. Furthermore, they are much more likely to have additional caring or financial responsibilities (Pearce, 2017)

Mature students at Warwick

Over the last five years the numbers of undergraduate mature students at Warwick are consistently between 8% to 9% of the overall student population (OfS, 2021). This is a relatively higher proportion in comparison to other high tariff universities, but it should be noted that enrolments in specialist and lower tariff institutions is much higher (where many mature students choose to study). This is perhaps reflective of mature students' decisions to study close to their homes, or the non-traditional (A level) qualifications that they have upon entry to university.



Mature students at Warwick can access the university through a variety of routes, such as direct entry, the Centre for Lifelong Learning (CLL), and programmes such as the Gateway and 2 + 2 provision.

In 2020/21 260 undergraduate mature students enrolled at Warwick, with the vast majority clustered in two academic areas (175 – MBChB; 38 – CLL, Social Studies). Similarly, within part-time mature undergraduates, the vast majority (102 of the 109 entrants) were studying within CLL.

The numbers of mature students outside of these departments are low, with many departments only having one or two students per year group. There is a self-perpetuating issue of relatively small numbers of mature students in departments leading to a lack of coherent planning and support for their needs. In turn, this can then lead to mature students having to ‘manage’ within the main university systems, which are predominately structured for 18- to 21-year-olds studying full-time.

Within Warwick’s WP Strategy and APP (Access and Participation Plan) there is specific reference and targets aimed at mature students. Most notably the aspiration to improve the continuation rates of mature first-degree entrants. This is coupled with the English regulators (OfS, 2021) renewed focus on mature students, with a desire ‘to set mature and younger students on a truly equal footing’, but also to increase the focus on mature students in access and participation plans.

Aims of research

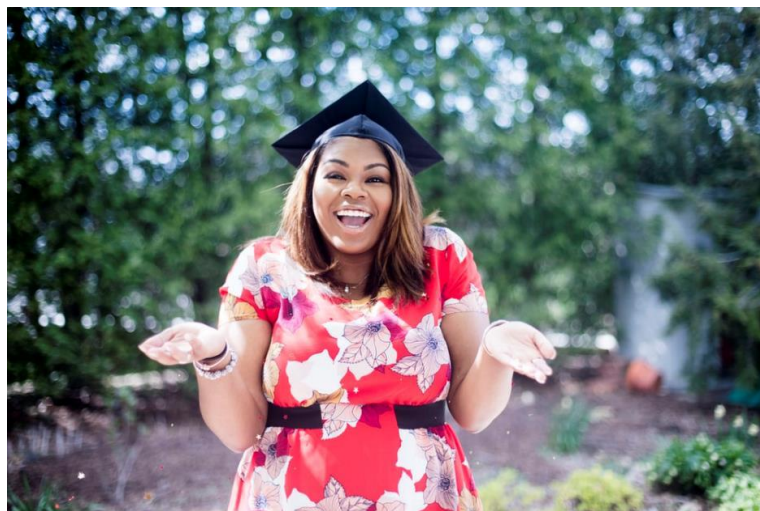
This qualitative research project sought to speak to current mature students who were studying at the University of Warwick. The aspiration was to better understand the mature student experience and be able to seek an insight into their successes and challenges as they navigated the university systems. It should also be acknowledged that this research took place during the pandemic, which has been a period of unprecedented change and disruption for all those involved in education.

Research Methodology: Student staff-partnership

This research project followed the conventions of research conversations (as defined by Duckworth & Smith, 2017), as opposed to research interviews. Both of the researchers were, or have recently been, mature students, so it was an acknowledgement of ‘dialogical stories’, whereby opinions, thoughts and feelings can be shared between researchers and participants.

We conducted twenty research conversations with mature students during the summer of 2020/21 (see Table 1). We sought to speak to students from across disciplines and age ranges. The students were at different points in their educational journeys, some at college studying the 2 + 2 degree, some undergraduates and also postgraduates. There was also a mixture of those who were studying full-time, but also part-time and some studying for over seven years to achieve their degree.

Through the research process we have been mindful to ensure that the words and views of the mature students were to be at the fore of any outputs. The suggestions that are towards the end of the paper are based on student-led recommendations.



Findings and discussion

Structure of learning

Within the departments outside of CLL there were issues around the lack of options for people who were part-time students, parents, and those with caring responsibilities. Timothy suggested that the module 'systems are not geared up for people who work', whilst Stacey stated that 'you feel, as a (mature) student, administratively, it's quite easy to fall down the bath plug' when it came to selecting modules.

Other participants spoke about their external responsibilities 'driving' their learning, as they would have liked to have taken certain options, but they weren't available to them at a time which they could attend (Monica). Rebecca discussed the 'struggles' with seminars and lectures, which clashed with her childcare responsibilities. This was echoed by Kaylee, who felt the university systems did not always consider those with other responsibilities, whilst others felt late changes in timetabling were particularly problematic (Marc, Kaylee). Mature students are often 'time poor' and have competing demands, some felt that a lack of access to reading lists during the summer (Carolyn) meant that they could not always plan their time as effectively.

Students who were part of the CLL provision found the times of the contact hours, structure of the day and approach to module selection most favourable, with a recognition that the systems were built and created for their needs. Students spoke about 'flexibility' and 'choice' (Cameron) which enabled them to take module options in the day or early evening slots.

There was also a recognition from many of the mature students that took part in this study that Warwick's depth and breadth of module selection was very good, and for some it was one of the reasons they chose to study here. However, the timings of the modules (outside of CLL) were not conducive to many mature students' lives.

Student support

Coming to university can be a big step into the unknown, and accessing differing types of support can make the difference between succeeding or dropping out. Some mature students have come back into education after a period without studying at all, or had a large gap in their education experiences. Mature students recognised that their needs were different but were keen to be seen as more than 'just a number' (Kelly).

Some of the mature students that had accessed support at Warwick and had got a lot out of it, for instance Monica and Rebecca spoke about getting essay writing support, which they valued. Diane accessed disability services, but had to be proactive to get support, this was similar to the experiences of Carolyn, who felt that students had to be 'savvy' to find support, rather than it be immediately obvious to them.

Lela stated that she felt 'resource wise University of Warwick is very well placed and they also reach out to help every student if we let them know that we are undergoing some issues or we have problems'. Kathy had used the 'welfare' (well-being support systems) at the university but did not find it particularly helpful, instead preferring the support of her peers and teaching staff.

Many of the participants spoke about their different situations, with a recognition that, at times they felt that university focused on the students who were in the majority, as Anna outlined:

The biggest problem is the presumption that one thing fits all and it's like, no, actually, it's fine for me to be different. It's fine for people to you know, need different levels of support and different levels of help, and like we shouldn't pretend that, you know, everybody is the same.

Most students felt that the Students Union (SU) was not 'for them', and that it was targeted to supporting 'younger undergraduates' (Cameron, Nathan). There was a general lack of engagement with the SU, and their activities from the participants in this study. A small number of the participants had engaged in mature student groups, for example Diane said:

I know that in the first year that I did attend a couple of events with the kids for the SU parent group, I can't remember exact title..... Yes, that was really good fun and that was nice.

Some of the mature students argued that the level of university social support for mature students could be much improved 'I would have liked more, sort of... not necessarily social gatherings, but social connections' (Rebecca), Michael stated how it would have been 'motivating and positive' for him to have contact with mature students outside of his immediate course.

Others used informal online systems as a means of connecting with each other:

Well, I socialize within my group, we set up a gateway, slack. We have WhatsApp and we have various things on Facebook where we keep in contact. You know outside of the classroom. (Marc)

It's not the same, you know you're not going out to the student union at the weekends and that sort of thing..... and having that support having some, you know, in a little WhatsApp group if you're worried about something, you could ask, what do you think about this? Do you know where this is? That was absolutely brilliant. (Rebecca)

Others felt that there was a need for a specific point of contact for mature students at a wider university level, outside of the personal tutor system. Stacey summarised this by stating: 'I think having a mature student kind of liaison tutor or something...so there was a sort of point of contact.' Some felt this would help with the 'invisibility' that mature students suffered from at Warwick, where they were often isolated outside of CLL (Stacey).

Peer support/Emotional support

The participants who took part in this research, in the main, relied on support from each other, particularly during the last two years. In a wider sense it has been difficult for students to make connections with each other when not on campus, but many had small friendship groups, usually with other mature students, rather than their younger peers. This led in some instances to students feeling like they didn't belong to the wider 'student cohort' (Timothy), or for those that studied in specialist provision like CLL, that they were outside the main university community (Carolyn, Kathy)

Some students spoke about been ostracised from their younger peers, or 'overlooked' (Kelly). Others had negative experiences, for example Monica stated:

I think one or two or three of us that mature students and somebody went to sit next to me and her friend grabbed her and went, oh no, as if you like don't sit near the old lady, other students treat you as other as you're not as a worthwhile student.

Other mature students had been mistaken for the lecturer which led to them feeling like they didn't belong, or they were an 'outlier' (Stacey, Carmen, Timothy).

All students could recall positive experiences when studying at Warwick and interacting with the teaching and professional services staff. Some participants spoke about the mutual respect that existed between themselves and staff (Kelly, Marc), which they appreciated. Conversely other mature students felt that some of the teaching staff in departments outside of CLL didn't know how to treat them (Monica) with a lack of understanding about their needs (Carmen, Diane).

A limited number of mature students felt that they did not need social interaction, or a peer group. They were essentially at Warwick to gain a qualification and the additional experiences were not a primary focus for them (Diane, Anna).



Setting the scene for mature students

The mature student experience can be complex, not only due to issues around caring responsibilities, but also concerns around finance, housing and work. Routes into HE can be made more complex by a lack of clarity around student finance (loans and maintenance). As Kathy explains:

I think people just don't know that it's available to them and they don't know that the funding would be available to them. I think if somebody said to me as a single mum 'you can go do this', I think no. But actually you can, and it's all that's meant for people like me, you know. And I think lots of my friends are like what are you doing? And I'll tell them, ah right. They don't know about it.

Timothy also felt more explanation and encouragement could be given to people before they apply so that they understand exactly what they can gain access to as 'a lot of people are coming in with no spare income'. Also that the UCAS application process was daunting, particularly for those with no familial history of Higher Education (Nathan).

The pre-applicant advice was seen by the participants as crucial not only to whether people would apply, but also what the options might be in the future. The sense that it would be worthwhile coming back into education, in the longer term was important for many mature students. Kelly

argued that ‘some real-life case studies I think would be encouraging and reassuring people that it's worthwhile.’

Other students felt the university did not do enough to encourage a wider diversity of students, particularly older applicants. This was evident in marketing materials (Cameron), open days (Paul) and a lack of outreach events in the community (Marc). Other participants felt that the university needed to ‘tell its story’ to attract mature students (Carmen).

Further information about on campus accommodation for mature students was felt to be important for some of the participants (Nathan, Lela). It can be difficult for mature students, with differing lifestyle routines, to be housed in student accommodation with younger students. Consideration about who they are paired with was felt to be important.

Student-led recommendations

1.1 A charter for mature students at Warwick:

To develop staff understanding of mature students’ strengths, responsibilities and needs we would advocate for a short charter outlining ten key things to note when dealing with mature students. This could be distributed to personal tutors, teaching staff and relevant professional services colleagues.

2.1 Further investment and consideration given to parents/carers/mature student groups and/or societies:

To better support mature students in developing peer relationships at the university further consideration could be given to how Warwick may best support people to come together. In a post-pandemic situation this could be face to face or online, but organised, regular meetings will give chance for students to engage. Further thought would need to be given to location, timings and timetabling to ensure people had enough notice to take part.

3.1 Named contact point at the university for mature students:

For mature students to feel less isolated there should be thought given to a central point of contact, perhaps a ‘Mature Student Advisor’, who may sit with a centralised team (such as WP and Outreach). This person would not act as a personal tutor but as someone who can signpost to appropriate services or advocate for mature students in departments.

4.1 Clear advice and guidance for mature students on pre-access finance and careers:

To develop the numbers of mature student applicants a concerted effort needs to be placed on recruitment, with supportive information, advice, and guidance (including student finance and employment routes). This could take the form of printed materials, videos, or social media campaign. Further thought may also be given to the representation of mature students in any external marketing materials

5.1 More academic writing workshops and support:

The university does offer a range of support for all students, including those who are mature, however there seems to be a disconnection and a lack of awareness of what is on offer. A more clearly defined offer (i.e., stating it is specifically for mature students), coupled with a targeted communication model, may help it raising awareness of the support that is offered.

6.1 Module/timetabling selection options (outside of CLL):

There is not a simple solution to offering modules at times which suit mature students, particularly as the numbers (at present) are relatively small. It may be possible to offer more timetabled sessions in twilight periods (for those who are employment), or offer alternative timings which avoid the start and end of the school day (where mature students often have childcare responsibilities). A commitment to reduce late timetabling changes, coupled with advance notice of reading lists would also be beneficial.

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Table 1.

Name*	Level of study	Subject	Age bracket
Kathy	Undergraduate	BA Social Studies	46 to 55
Carolyn	Undergraduate	BA Social Studies and Counselling	46 to 55
Wendy	Undergraduate	BA Social Studies	36 to 45
Timothy	Undergraduate	BA Social Studies	56 to 65
Kaylee	Undergraduate	History	26 to 35

Stacey	Undergraduate	History and English	56 to 65
Lena	Undergraduate	BA Early Childhood Studies	46 to 55
Diane	Undergraduate	BA Social Studies (Philosophy major)	36 to 45
Nathan	Undergraduate	Biomed, Life sciences	18 to 25
Cameron	Postgraduate	IER PhD	56 to 65
Kelly	Undergraduate	Person centred therapeutic relationship degree	46 to 55
Anna	Undergraduate	Social Studies CLL	56 to 65
Ivy	Undergraduate	CLL - BA in Social Studies (majoring in Sociology)	26 to 35
Monica	Undergraduate	CLL Health and Social Policy	36 to 45
Rebecca	Postgraduate	BA Education	46 to 55
Paul	Postgraduate	MSc in Intercultural Communications for Business and the Professions	70+
Carmen	Postgraduate	MSc Intercultural Communications for Business and the Professions - Applied Linguistics	36 to 45
Marc	Undergraduate	BA (Hon) Social Studies	56 to 65
Lela	Other	PhD, History	36 to 45
Joyce	Undergraduate	PAIS	18 to 25

**Please note these are pseudonyms*