

**BRIEFING PAPER**

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# Mature higher education students in England

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Paul Bolton**Contents:**

1. Background
2. Numbers of mature students
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## Summary

There is no official definition of a ‘mature student’ - this term is usually used to refer to older students, particularly students over 21 at the start of an undergraduate degree course.

In 2018/19 there were **237,000 mature undergraduate entrants at UK universities; 36% of all undergraduate entrants**. There were **189,000 mature postgraduate entrants in 2018/19; 53% of postgraduate entrants**.

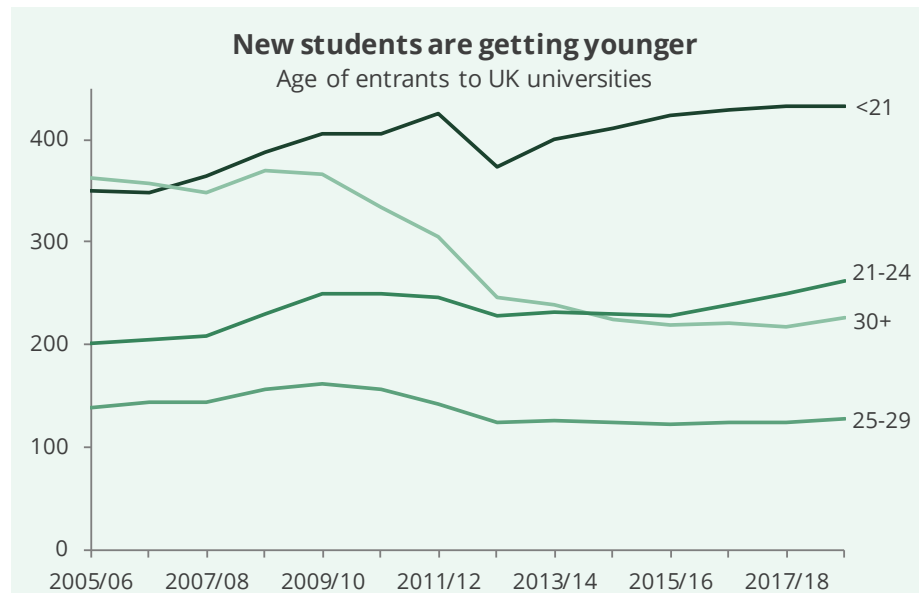
**Mature students are much more likely to study part-time at all levels.** In 2018/19 47% of undergraduate mature students studied part time compared to 4% of young undergraduates. **Mature students are also much more likely to study ‘other undergraduate’ courses** (below first degree level, a large majority of these courses are part-time). In 2018/19 80% of students starting other undergraduate courses were aged 21 or older.

The number of mature **postgraduate entrants fell from just over 200,000 in 2010/11 to below 180,000 in 2014/15. It has since increased** by almost 18,000 (10%) to 194,000 in 2018/19 **The total number of mature undergraduate entrants fell from more than 400,000 in 2010/11 to fewer than 240,000 in 2017/18 – a drop of 40%.**

In 2019 23% of home entrants to full-time undergraduate courses were mature students (aged 21 or older). New **female students were slightly more like to be mature** (25% compared to 20% for males). Overall 21% of white students were mature compared to 25% of all minority ethnic groups, in 2019 there were **relatively high proportions of mature entrants among Black students** (41%), particularly Black women (44%), and **relatively low proportions among Asian students** (15%) and White males and males from mixed backgrounds (both 18%).

In 2019 **16% of mature full-time undergraduate entrants had a self-reported disability**. This was higher than the 12% of young entrants.

Students aged 25+ **were more likely to be studying subjects allied to medicine or education**. They made up 39% of students on these courses compared to 20% of the overall student population.



### Unis with the most students aged 25+ 2018/19, all modes and levels

1	The Open University	97,355
2	Anglia Ruskin University	12,480
3	University College London	12,210
4	King's College London	10,375
5	University of the West of England, Bristol	9,805
6	The University of Oxford	9,655
7	The University of Central Lancashire	9,025
8	Teesside University	8,845
9	London South Bank University	8,825
10	University of South Wales	8,730
	<b>All UK universities</b>	<b>733,245</b>

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Mature undergraduate students are **more likely to drop out of their course**. In 2016-17 15.2% did not continue in higher education after their first year compared to 7.8% of young students. Mature students are **less likely to graduate with a first or upper second class degree**; 67% did so in 2016-17 compared with 79% of young students. Mature graduates are **more likely to be in work in highly skilled employment**. In 2015-16 77% were in such jobs compared with 73% of young graduates.

Mature students are **funded at the same level as other full-time undergraduate students** despite many mature students having extra financial responsibilities.

Mature students **enter higher education with a wider variety of qualifications** than younger students and providers are often more flexible when it comes to admissions criteria. These students often enter higher education for many different reasons and not solely for career purposes.

# 1. Background

There is no set definition of a 'mature student' - this term is usually used to refer to older students, or students returning to study after a period out of full-time education.

Mature students are generally classed as students over 21 years of age at the beginning of an undergraduate course, or over 25 years of age at the beginning of a postgraduate course. Over half of mature students are aged between 21 and 24, and around 40% are over 30.

Mature students often have more responsibilities than younger students and they may balance their studies alongside work or caring roles.

**These students are an under-represented group in higher education.**

Mature students enter higher education with a **range of prior educational experiences**. Some mature students may have missed out on early education and may have few, or no previous qualifications – these students may enter higher education by taking Access to HE diploma courses, or by the accreditation of prior learning (APL) based on their work or life experiences.

Mature students may also be taking postgraduate qualifications after a break in study, or a degree in a new subject area as part of their career progression.

Older students enter higher education for a **variety of reasons and they may have different expectations to younger students**.

Mature students are a very diverse group. Higher education institutions (HEIs) therefore need to be aware of the different and varied needs and support requirements of these students.

The GOV.UK webpage, [Mature students: university and funding](#), provides information for mature students.

## Further reading

Office for Students webpage, [Mature Learners](#)

Office for Students briefing, [Mature and part-time students](#)

MillionPlus, [Forgotten Learners: Building a system that works for mature learners](#), March 2018

## 2. Numbers of mature students

### 2.1 Student numbers

Higher education statistics define mature students as undergraduates starting their courses aged 21 or older and postgraduates aged 25 or older.

In 2018/19 there were **237,000** mature undergraduate entrants, home and overseas, at UK universities; **36%** of all undergraduate entrants. There were **189,000** mature postgraduate entrants in 2018/19; **53%** of postgraduate entrants.

The chart below illustrates the age profile of mature undergraduate entrants from England. Just under half were in their 20s. Around a quarter in their 30s. Around 8% were in their 50s or 60s.

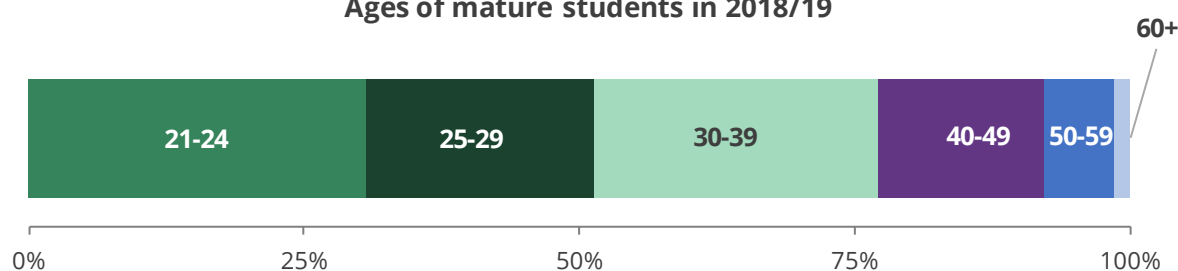
#### Mature entrants at UK universities 2018/19

All home and overseas students

	Undergraduates (age 21+)		Postgraduates (age 25+)	
	number	%	number	%
Full-time	124,805	23%	93,250	38%
Part-time	112,065	87%	95,815	87%
<b>All</b>	<b>236,870</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>189,065</b>	<b>53%</b>

Source: [Who's studying in HE?](#), HESA

#### Ages of mature students in 2018/19



Source: Open University -personal communication

**Mature students are much more likely to study part-time** at all levels. In 2018/19 **47%** of undergraduate mature students studied part time compared to 4% of young undergraduates. In the same year **51%** of postgraduate mature students were part-time compared to 8% of young postgraduates. Overall **87% of part-time students were mature.**<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, **mature students are also much more likely to study 'other undergraduate' courses** (below first degree level). In 2018/19 **80%** of students starting other undergraduate courses were aged 21 or older. The large majority of these courses are part-time.

As mature students are defined by their age on starting their course the number across the whole student population cannot be inferred by a simple age breakdown of the student population. For instance, an undergraduate aged 23 may have started their course as a young student (aged <21). This is particularly the case for part-time students.

The following table therefore gives a breakdown of the student population by level and mode of study and multiple age groups. This gives a snapshot of the older student population.

<sup>1</sup> Source: [Who's studying in HE?](#), HESA

## Students at UK universities by age 2018/19

All home and overseas students

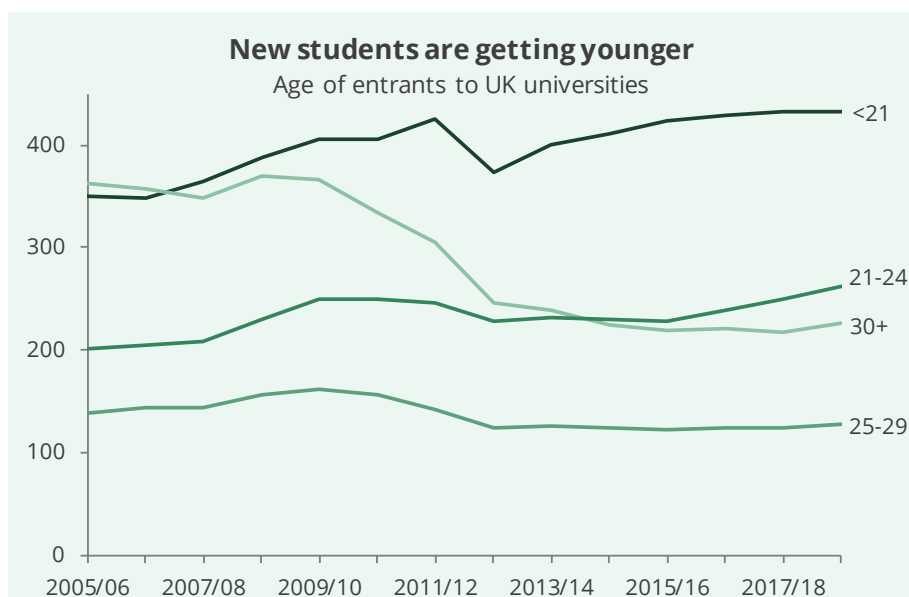
	Undergraduates		Postgraduates	
	number	%	number	%
<i>Full-time</i>				
20 and under	934,930	62%	2,715	1%
21-24 years	403,555	27%	178,390	53%
25-29 years	73,735	5%	90,150	27%
30 years and over	92,835	6%	68,225	20%
<i>Part-time</i>				
20 and under	29,295	11%	130	0%
21-24 years	49,675	18%	23,405	10%
25-29 years	48,605	18%	46,785	21%
30 years and over	143,780	53%	156,655	69%
<i>All</i>				
20 and under	964,225	54%	2,845	1%
21-24 years	453,230	26%	201,795	36%
25-29 years	122,340	7%	136,935	24%
30 years and over	236,615	13%	224,880	40%

Source: [Who's studying in HE?](#), HESA

Overall there were just over **460,000 students aged 30 or older across all modes and levels** in 2018/19. 810,000 undergraduates were aged 21 or older and 359,000 aged 25 or older. There were 362,000 postgraduates aged 25 or older and 225,000 aged 30 or older. Part-time students are much more likely to be older.

## Trends

The chart below looks at the age of entrants across all levels and modes



Sources: [PQ 36228](#), on Mature Students, 4 May 2016 [Who's studying in HE?](#), HESA

Most age groups increased in numbers in the first few years covered here, but there was a divergence after 2009/10. Younger entrants continued to increase, albeit with a dip in 2012/13, but the **numbers aged 25-29, and 30+ (particularly) fell to 2015/16** and have only stabilised since then. This **trend mirrors that in part-time students** detailed in the briefing paper [Part-time undergraduate students in England](#). The chart opposite illustrates the shift in the make-up of the student population from the start and end of this period.

The number of mature postgraduate entrants fell from just over 200,000 in 2010/11 to below 180,000 in 2014/15. It has since **increased by almost 18,000 (10%) to 194,000** in 2018/19. There are a number of possible reasons for this increase including **loans for masters' courses** (from 2016/17) and the **increased number of graduates** in the population.

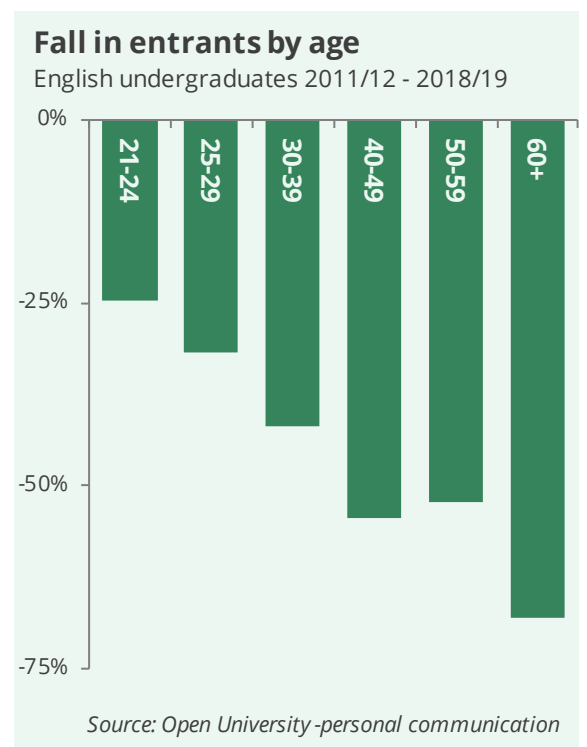
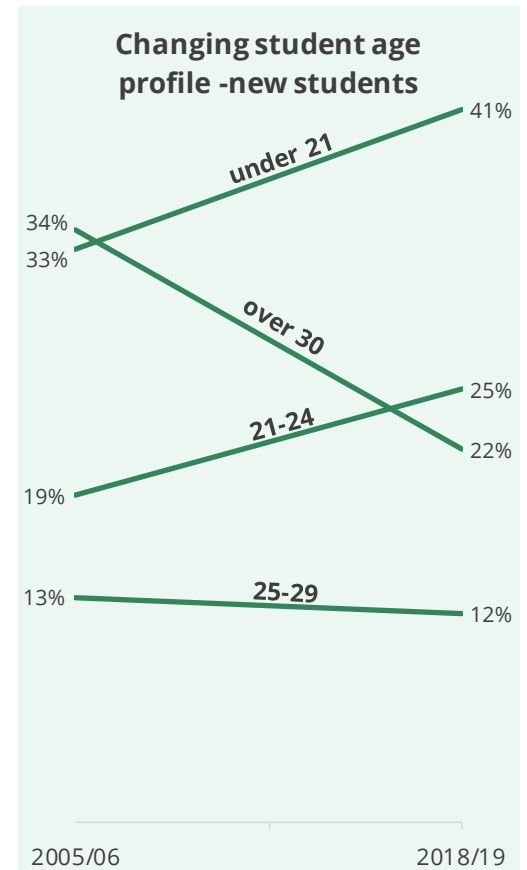
**The total number of mature undergraduate entrants fell from more than 400,000 in 2010/11 to fewer than 240,000 in 2017/18.** There was a slight increase in 2018/19, but the total was still **40%** below the 2010/11 number. The drop in numbers was even larger for older mature students as shown in the chart (below) opposite.

Within the undergraduate total the number of mature entrants to first degree courses has increased over the last five years and the 2018/19 figure was **only 5% below the 2010/11 level**. However, numbers on 'other undergraduate' courses (below first degree<sup>2</sup>) have fallen by **64%** (153,000) over the same period and there is no sign of any increase. Most of these courses are taken part-time.<sup>3</sup>

### Participation rates and trends in England

The Government measures the participation rates of students from England who start higher education for the first time. This includes full and part-time study.

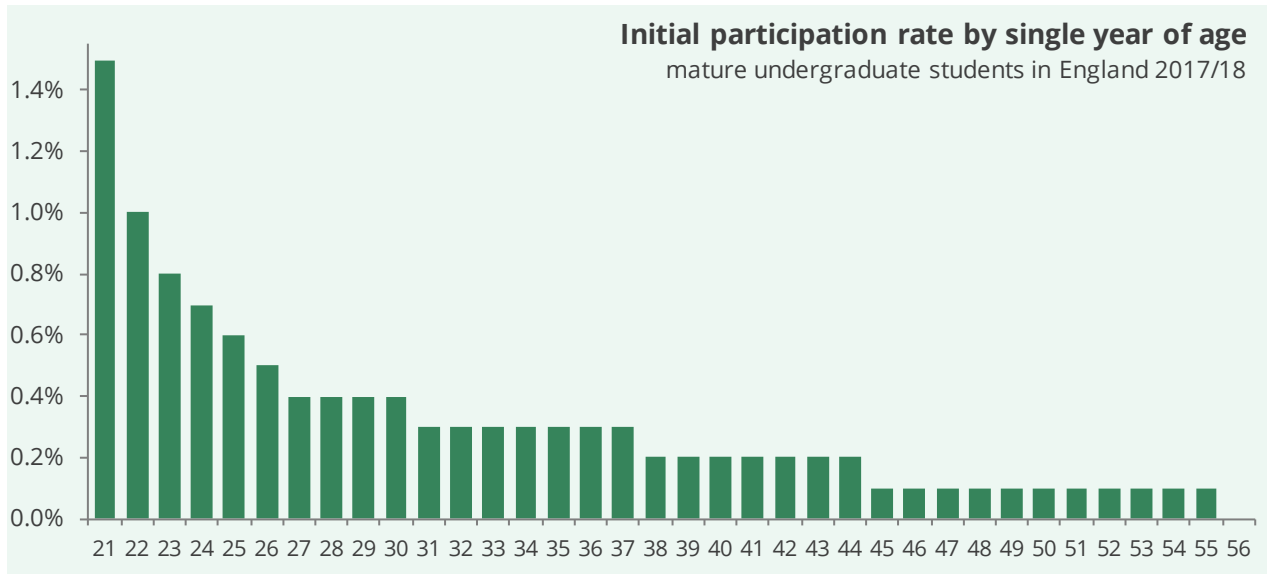
The chart on p9 shows that the participation rate for mature students falls rapidly after age 21 to below 1% (of the cohort) for those over 23 and to 0.1% or lower for those aged 45 and above. The combined **mature participation rate was 11.3%** compared to 43.6% among those aged 20 or younger.



<sup>2</sup> Sub degree courses may be referred to as level 4 or 5 courses – library briefing, [Level 4 and 5 education](#), 4 November 2019 discusses the decline in students taking these courses on p11

<sup>3</sup> [Who's studying in HE?](#), HESA; [Higher education statistics for the UK](#) (various years), HESA





Source: [Participation rates in higher education: 2006 to 2017](#), DfES

The **mature entry rate was higher among women at 14.0%** in 2017/18 compared to 8.7% for men. Women also have higher participation rates among younger students.

**The combined entry rate for mature students has fallen over time from around 18% in 2006/07 to just over 11% in 2017/18**, although there has been little change in the past four years. This decline **may in part reflect the increase in participation among younger people** which consequently reduces the population of older people who have not been to university and hence reduces the number of older learners starting higher education for the first time.

The initial participation rate for mature full-time students fell in 2012/13, when higher fees were introduced, but has increased since then. The rate for **mature part-time study has fallen over time from over 12% in 2006/07 to 4.4% in 2017/18.**<sup>4</sup> For more information on trends in part-time students see the briefing paper [Part-time undergraduate students in England](#), 20 January 2020.

## 2.2 Educational background

Mature students entering higher education have a wide range of educational backgrounds qualifications. A report by UCAS in June 2018 analysed mature student data and found that mature students held different qualifications on entering higher education, depending on their age:

Looking at the most recent qualification a student applies with (pending or achieved), applicants aged 21 – 25 are far more likely to be accepted with just A levels (12.7 per cent) or vocational qualifications (26.4 per cent), such as BTECs, compared to the other age groups.

In the other age groups, the Access to HE Diploma becomes more prominent, although this seems to be declining over time. In

<sup>4</sup> [Participation Rates in Higher Education: 2006 to 2018](#), DfE

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2017, 20.7 per cent of accepted applicants age 36 and over had the Access to HE Diploma, down from 30.9 per cent in 2011.

The percentage share of applicants with GCSEs/O levels as their most recent qualification also increases with age (from 3.5 per cent in 21 – 25 year olds, to 7.3 per cent in those aged 36 and over).

In addition, in 2017, over 15 per cent of mature applicants from each age group had a degree as their most recent qualification.

Many mature students enter higher education without conventional qualifications through accreditation of their prior learning (APL) outside education through work or other experiences.

### Box 1: Access to Higher Education Diploma

Access to HE Diploma courses are **further education courses** which are designed for students who do not have the required qualifications to enter higher education - they aim to give students the knowledge and skills to succeed in higher education.

Access to HE courses are delivered by colleges in England and Wales; there are over 1,200 recognised courses covering a range of subjects, such as nursing, social studies, law, and art and design. Access to HE courses are recognised by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

Access to HE Diplomas are made up of 60 credits, 45 of these are at level 3 (A level equivalent) and graded. The remaining 15 credits are not graded and may be at level 2 or level 3.

[Advanced Learner Loans](#) (ALL) are available to pay for course fees -the maximum ALL amounts available for Access Diplomas range from £3,022 to £5,197 and students who go on to successfully complete a degree course will have their **remaining ALL loan written off**.

Information is available at [Access to Higher Education](#).

## 2.3 Widening participation

According to the Office for Students mature learners are more likely than younger students **to have characteristics associated with disadvantage and under-representation** in higher education:

They are more likely to:

- have non-traditional qualifications
- come from lower socio-economic backgrounds
- have family or caring responsibilities
- be disabled
- be from black and minority ethnic groups.<sup>5</sup>

Mature students are an under-represented group in higher education and the Office for Students has made it one of its **priorities to improve access and increase participation** in higher education by these students:

The Office for Students' '[Regulatory Notice 1: Access and participation plan guidance for 2019-20](#)' (2018) identifies reversing the decline in higher education participation by mature students from under-represented groups as one of two key priorities relating to improving fair access to higher education. The document also highlights an expectation that all institutions with

<sup>5</sup> Office for Students, [Mature learners](#)

an access and participation plan will assess their performance in relation to mature students.<sup>6</sup>

There are strong arguments for increasing access to higher education for mature students from a social mobility perspective and from an economic one. Mature learners play an important part in upskilling the workforce to help meet the future economic demands facing the country.

### Data on full-time undergraduates

Information published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency is not broken down by age and different widening participation characteristics. Data published by UCAS is, but this only covers full-time undergraduates and hence misses out part-time study which is dominated by mature students.

**In 2019 23% of home entrants via UCAS were mature students** (aged 21 or older). New female students were slightly more like to be mature (25% v 20% for males).

Overall **21% of white students were mature compared to 25% of all minority ethnic groups**. Such comparisons are limited because the age profile of different ethnic groups will vary. However, in 2019 there relatively **high proportions of mature entrants among Black students (41%), particularly Black women (44%),** and relatively **low proportions among Asian students (15%) and White males and males from mixed backgrounds (both 18%).**<sup>7</sup>

**In 2019 16% of mature full-time undergraduate entrants had a self-reported disability. This was higher than the 12% of young entrants.** Again, comparisons may be affected by the overall age profile of the population with disabilities. Mature students were more likely to have the following disabilities:<sup>8</sup>

- Mental health conditions
- Long-standing illness
- Multiple disabilities
- Blind/partially sighted
- Deaf/partial hearing
- Wheelchair/mobility
- Multiple disabilities

There was little or no difference between young and mature entrants in the proportion with autistic disorders and learning difficulties.

## 2.4 Where do mature students study?

A report by UCAS in June 2018<sup>9</sup> looked at application data for mature students and found that mature students favoured **low tariff providers** – these are higher education institutions which accept students with lower grades than other institutions.

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<sup>6</sup> Office for Students, [Mature and part-time students](#)

<sup>7</sup> [End of cycle data resources 2019](#), UCAS

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> UCAS [Admissions patterns for mature applicants 2017 Cycle](#), June 2018

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The following table lists the top 10 institutions by total number and share of students aged 25 and older. This covers undergraduates and postgraduates. In 2018/19 the **Open University had by far the most students aged 25 and older with more than 97,000**. This was more than the rest of the top ten combined and more than one in eight of all students aged 25+. There were three other institutions with a greater share of students aged 25+ than the Open University. Most of the institutions with the highest shares are **specialist institutions**. In 22 institutions out of 169 more than half the student population were aged 25+.

### UK universities with the most students aged 25+, 2018/19

All modes and levels

Top 10 by number		Top 10 by percentage			
1	The Open University	97,355	1	The Institute of Cancer Research	85%
2	Anglia Ruskin University	12,480	2	London Business School	82%
3	University College London	12,210	3	London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine	80%
4	King's College London	10,375	4	The Open University	80%
5	University of the West of England, Bristol	9,805	5	Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine	79%
6	The University of Oxford	9,655	6	Cranfield University	73%
7	The University of Central Lancashire	9,025	7	Birkbeck College	72%
8	Teesside University	8,845	8	Gower College Swansea	69%
9	London South Bank University	8,825	9	The University College of Osteopathy	68%
10	University of South Wales	8,730	10	Glyndŵr University	63%
<b>All UK universities</b>		<b>733,245</b>	<b>All UK universities</b>		<b>31%</b>

Source: [Who's studying in HE?](#), HESA

## Open University

By far the biggest provider of education for mature students is the Open University (OU). The majority of the OU's students are mature students and **20% of all mature English-domiciled first degree entrants study with the OU**. In terms of age distribution, the majority of the OU's students are aged 21-39, and in 2018/19 885 students were over 60.

The OU provides opportunities for many second chance learners and in 2018/19, **13% of mature students over 21 were had low prior educational attainment** (level 2 qualifications or no formal qualifications).

A survey by the OU found that 64% of students at the OU were studying for career purposes, whilst 36% were doing so for personal reasons. Over **75% of the OU's mature students are in employment**.

## 2.5 What courses do mature students take?

Mature students typically study a smaller range of subjects than younger students.

**Students aged 25+<sup>10</sup> were more likely to be studying subjects allied to medicine or education. They made up 39% of students on these courses compared to 20% of the overall student population.** They were much less likely than younger students to be studying mass communication (7% on this subject again compared to 20% overall), physical sciences (8%), maths (10%) or creative arts and design (10%). Looking at more detailed subject breakdowns there were also **very low proportions of students aged 25+ on many languages courses** including French (5%) and Spanish (5%).<sup>11</sup>

Subjects allied to medicine and education had twice as many students aged 25+ than across all subjects.

A large number of mature students opt for more **flexible ways of learning** than a full-time degree – many students take part-time degrees, distance learning courses, or accelerated degrees.

### Box 2: Accelerated degrees

Accelerated degrees are normal three-year undergraduate degrees studied in two years – these degrees were [first piloted](#) in 2006 at the universities of Staffordshire, Derby, Leeds Metropolitan, Northampton and the Medway Partnership in Kent. Subjects offered included geography, business studies, business management, accounting, finance, law, English, marketing, and tourism.

In January 2019 the Government passed [regulations](#) to encourage more providers to offer two year degrees by allowing a 20 per cent uplift in annual tuition fees for these courses. Students taking an accelerated degree can still however save 20 per cent overall in total fee costs. The new fee regulations came into effect in September 2019.

Currently there are still not many universities offering accelerated degrees. The private University of Buckingham offers mainly two-year degrees and other private providers also offer these courses. Around 15 public universities including: Staffordshire, Salford, London Metropolitan, Greenwich, Middlesex, Gloucestershire and Hertfordshire, also offer these degrees. Most accelerated degrees are in business, law and humanities subjects.

## 2.6 Outcomes for mature students

**Mature undergraduate students are more likely to drop out of their course.** In 2016-17 **15.2% did not continue in higher education** after their first year compared to 7.8% of young students. This gap has grown over time from 5.4 percentage points in 2010-11 to 7.4 points in 2016-17.<sup>12</sup>The Office for Students encourages providers to consider how they can better support mature students and improve their retention.

**Mature students are less likely to graduate with a first or upper second class degree,** 67% did so in 2016-17 compared with 79% of young students. Mature students are much less likely to enter with 'traditional' qualifications such as A-levels and BTECs. This makes like-for-like comparisons difficult. However, some difference in degree classifications persists even after entry qualifications are taken into account.

**Mature graduates are more likely to be in work in a highly skilled employment.** In 2015-16 77% were in such jobs compared with 73%

<sup>10</sup> Across all years of study

<sup>11</sup> [Who's studying in HE?: Personal characteristics](#), HESA

<sup>12</sup> [Continuation and transfer rates](#), OfS

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of young graduates. This difference is still present when degree class is taken into account.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> [Differences in student outcomes](#), OfS

## 3. Support for mature students

The Government provides mature students with the same level of support as other younger students -there are **no loans or grants specifically for mature students**.

Information on funding for students is available on the GOV.UK website at [Student Finance](#) and in a Student Finance England publication, [Student finance – how you're assessed and paid 2019/20](#).

### Full-time students

In 2019/20 full-time students are eligible to apply for a tuition fee loan of up to £9,250 per annum – there is **no age limit on tuition fee loans**.

Students up to the age of 59 can also apply for a maintenance loan of up to £7,529 for students living at home, £8,944 for students living away from home and outside London and up to £11,672 for students living in London. Students over the age of 60 can apply for a loan of up to £3,783.

### Part-time students

Part-time students are eligible for a tuition fee loan of up to £6,935 per annum and a maintenance loan if the course has a 'course intensity' of 25% or more. Students **over the age of 60 are not eligible for a maintenance loan**.

### Distance learning students

Distance learning students on full-time courses may be eligible for a tuition fee loan of up to £9,250 per annum but they are **not** eligible for maintenance loans as these loans are based on attendance.

Students studying on distance learning courses because of a disability can apply for the full student support package of maintenance loans and extra help in the form of Disabled Students' Allowances.

### 3.1 Support for dependants

Full-time students on undergraduate courses who have adult dependents or children can apply for extra help in the form of a [Childcare Grant](#), [Parents' Learning Allowance](#) or an [Adult Dependants' Grant](#).

Students experiencing financial difficulty may also be eligible for [extra help](#) through their institution's hardship fund.

### 3.2 Are levels of support sufficient?

Mature students are funded at the same level as other full-time undergraduate students despite many mature students having extra financial responsibilities.

Childcare funding can be a particular issue for mature students and this funding is means tested. Student Finance England guidance document,

Caring responsibilities are a common feature of mature student life.

[Forgotten Learners](#),  
March 2018

[Grants for Dependants AY 19/20](#), states on p34 that in 2019/20 the upper **household income level for a Childcare Grant for a student with two or more children is £26,212.03**.

Furthermore, many older students study by distance learning and students on these course are generally **ineligible for full-time or part-time maintenance loans**.

In March 2016 the Government launched a consultation on maintenance loans for part-time students (loans were subsequently introduced for part-time students from 1 August 2018). The consultation included proposals to extend maintenance loans to distance learning students. The Government response to the consultation, [Part-time Maintenance Loans Government consultation response, March 2017](#) said that maintenance loans would be extended to part-time distance learning students in 2019/20 "subject to the development of a robust control regime to manage the particular risks and challenges associated with this mode of study" (p11).

However a PQ on [8 March 2019](#) said that "**due to the poor uptake of part-time maintenance loans it would not be economically viable to extend maintenance loans to distance learning students**".

A [report](#) by MillionPlus in March 2018 said that survey data indicated that mature students are on average **more debt-averse than younger learners**. The report recommended that the Government should restore maintenance grants and review student finance to assess whether there was adequate financial support for mature students with the lowest household incomes.<sup>14</sup>

## Loans for part-time students

Data on student loans do not include any indication of the age of students. Loans for part-time student can be seen as a proxy for (some) mature students.

In 2018/19 just over **80,000 part-time students from England took out tuition fee loans** with a provisional total value of £237 million. Maintenance loans for new part-time students were introduced in 2018/19. Provisional data shows that **3,900 part-time students took out maintenance loans** with a total value of £17.5 million. Early data for 2019 suggests an increase in part-time maintenance loan uptake as more students become eligible. However, **part-time students are much less likely than full-time students to take out student loans**. More than one million undergraduates took out fee and maintenance loans in 2018/19 with a combined value of more than £15 billion.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> [Forgotten Learners: Building a system that works for mature learners](#), MillionPlus, March 2018

<sup>15</sup> [Student Support for Higher Education in England 2019](#), SLC



## 4. Issues

### 4.1 Drop off in numbers of mature students

The evidence shows that there is a declining proportion of students aged 21 and over applying to and entering full-time higher education in the UK, this is particularly the case for students over the age of 25.

The decline has been attributed to a number of factors including fee rises in 2012 and the removal of student grants and NHS bursaries. Mature students tend to be more debt-averse than younger students and changes in student funding arrangements could therefore possibly have a bigger impact on this group.

Government policy on mature students was set out in a PQ in July 2018, the response acknowledges that declining numbers is a concern:

**[Mature Students](#)**: Written question - 165471

**Gordon Marsden** on: 18 July 2018

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment he has made of the reasons for the decrease in the number of mature students applying to university in 2018-19.

**Sam Gyimah** on: 23 July 2018

The rise in the entry rate of 18 year olds to full-time university every year since 2012, and a total proportional increase of 20% between 2012 and 2017, means that there is a reduced pool of suitable qualified mature applicants to enter in subsequent years. It is also important to note that a large proportion of mature applicants normally apply for places later in the year.

The Universities and College Admissions Service plan to publish insights about the most important factors influencing the application choices of mature students later this year.

Studying later in life can bring enormous benefits for individuals, the economy and employers. We are therefore taking a number of steps to support mature students and allow them to access and succeed within higher education.

In our first guidance to the Office for Students (OfS) (published 28 February 2018), which sets out our priorities for access and participation plans for 2019/20, we have asked the OfS to encourage higher education providers to consider the recruitment and support of mature learners.

We are also removing barriers to accelerated courses. Evidence shows that accelerated courses appeal particularly to mature students who want to retrain and enter the workplace more quickly than a traditional course would permit.

### 4.2 Decline in part-time learning

As mentioned in section 2.1 **mature students are much more likely to study part-time at all levels**. A report by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) [Unheard: the voices of part-time adult learners](#), February 2020 highlights this fact and states that the **drop in part-time provision is a factor in the decline in the number of mature students**:

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.

[Forgotten Learners](#),  
March 2018

Most part-time learners are mature students, and the oft-reported drop in part-time student numbers can be viewed as a proxy for the retreat of older learners from higher education.

The report suggests that the Office for Students should play a more interventionist role with regard to mature students and that the Government should incentivise the provision of part-time learning:

The guidance issued to institutions by the Office for Students identifies 'mature' learners as a disadvantaged group but leaves it up to individual universities to decide the extent to which they are a target group and whether any access or attainment gaps need to be addressed.

This is not enough.

Policymakers could consider more explicit carrots and sticks. A start would be to reward financially those institutions which commit to attracting more part-time learners and supporting them to successful outcomes.

Library briefing paper, [Part-time undergraduate students in England](#), 20 January 2020, discusses issues with part-time learners.

### 4.3 The Augar Review

[The Review of Post-18 Education and Funding](#), May 2019 - the Augar Review looked at funding across the tertiary education sector and made recommendations for reform to increase opportunities for everyone and to encourage **lifelong learning and flexible learning**. Some of these proposals could impact on mature students.

On p97 the report refers to distance learning and the Open University and says that fees and funding of on-line courses **should be kept under review**:

#### **Distance Learning**

The Complete University Guide (CUG) defines distance learning as 'a way of learning remotely without being in regular face-to-face contact with a teacher in the classroom'. More than 270,000 UK undergraduate students are taking their first degrees via distance learning, together with some 108,000 postgraduate students. In the UK, the majority of these are studying with the Open University. As noted elsewhere, there has been a decline in HE student numbers on these programmes in recent years. Many learners are studying for professional qualifications through this method and online learning is a major plank of the National Retraining Scheme.

Distance learning continues a tradition of non-campus learning that began with correspondence courses. Many campus providers incorporate elements of online provision into their courses and programmes and we note with interest the use of distance teaching, sometimes at very low cost, through mobile and other devices at degree level and as part of continuous professional development.

It may be necessary in terms of fees and funding to maintain a distinction between those programmes which are designed, advertised and delivered as campus based – notwithstanding they may have on-line components – and those which are predominantly intended to be studied remotely. This matter should be kept under review by the OfS.

The Review makes a number of other proposals on funding and several of these could affect mature students:

- **Lifelong Learning Allowance** - the Review proposes introducing a new flexible loan:

Employment patterns are changing fast with shorter job cycles and longer working lives requiring many people to reskill and upskill. We recommend the introduction of a **lifelong learning loan allowance** to be used at higher technical and degree level at any stage of an adult's career for full and part-time students. To encourage retraining and flexible learning, we recommend that this should be available in modules where required. We intend that our proposals should facilitate transfer between different institutions and we make proposals for greater investment in so-called 'second chance' learning at intermediate levels. (p10)

#### **Recommendation 2.1**

The government should introduce a single lifelong learning loan allowance for tuition loans at Levels 4, 5 and 6, available for adults aged 18 or over, without a publicly funded degree. This should be set, as it is now, as a financial amount equivalent to four years' full-time undergraduate degree funding. (p40)

- **Funding modules of study**, Recommendation 2.2 on p40 proposes that learners should be able to access student finance for tuition fee and maintenance support for modules of credit-based Level 4, 5 and 6 qualifications.
- **ELQ rules should be scrapped** for those taking out loans for Levels 4, 5 and 6. (Recommendation 2.3 p40)

Further the Review also proposes **improving support for access and participation** and targeting increased teaching grant towards disadvantaged students including part-time and mature students and directing funding towards institutions that do most to support social mobility (p97).

The Government intends to respond to the Review with the next spending review.

## **4.4 Equivalent or lower level qualifications (ELQs)**

A large number of mature students take second degrees but since September 2008 there has been no general funding for students taking undergraduate degrees that are at an equivalent or lower level (ELQ) to one that they already hold.<sup>16</sup>This policy aims to prioritise Government funding towards students taking first degrees.

There are however some exemptions to the ELQ policy for students taking specific second degrees: **medicine, dentistry, veterinary surgery, social work, architecture**, undergraduate **initial teacher training, part-time STEM degrees**, pre-registration courses in **nursing, midwifery and allied health professional** subjects, **dental therapy and dental hygiene** courses.

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<sup>16</sup> See briefing SN/SP/4529 [Higher education funding of second qualifications of an equivalent or lower level \(ELQs\)](#)

The ELQ rules do not apply to students receiving a **Disabled Students Allowance** and to students taking **foundation degrees**.

The ELQ rules also apply to postgraduate loans

Relaxing the ELQ rules further, as suggested by the Augar Review could potentially increase the number of mature students.

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