

What is the lived experience of Mature Students at UWE Bristol?

Fiona Hamilton, Evaluation and Data Manager. Ellie Cotgrave,
Data and Evaluation Officer. Nina Higson-Sweeney, EDI
Research Intern

Contents

Executive Summary.....	3
Background	3
Method	3
Findings	3
Recommendations	4
Introduction	4
Research questions	5
Method	5
Participants	6
Findings	6
Theme 1: Lived experience of mature students	6
Adjusting to student life	6
Barriers for mature students to engage socially.....	7
Integration of young and mature	8
Theme 2: Students’ experiences of support.....	9
Varied experiences of support.....	9
Support is there if you go looking for it	10
Academic support	10
The Students’ Union	11
Other support services.....	11
Theme 3: Suggestions for additional support.....	13
Social space for mature students	13
Specific accommodation support or mature students	13
Career and placement support from UWE	13
Discussion.....	14
Recommendations	16
References	18
Appendix a – focus group questions.....	19
Appendix b- thematic map	20

Executive Summary

Background

This report describes research carried out by the Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity (EDI) team at UWE Bristol to understand the lived experience of mature students, aged 21 or over on entry to their Undergraduate degree. The research sought to understand whether mature students at UWE Bristol faced the same barriers as those found in the literature by exploring the following questions:

1. What is the lived experience of mature Undergraduate students at UWE Bristol?
2. How well does the University and Students' Union support mature students?
3. How do students feel this support could be improved?

Method

This study investigated the experience of mature students through a series of focus groups. Participants were a self-selecting sample and were initially asked to complete a sign-up survey to register their interest and select their availability for a focus group. In total, 64 students completed the sign-up survey and 8 focus group sessions were scheduled, to allow for participant drop out.

In February and March 2020 6 focus groups took place with a total of 17 participants. The final two focus groups were cancelled due to the closure of the university campus so an online survey was sent to the remaining participants containing similar questions. The survey had 22 responses, bringing the total number of participants to 39.

Findings

The findings showed that participants had experienced challenges in adjusting to study that typically wouldn't be faced by those coming to university straight from school or college. Mature students who had been out of education for a long time often felt they lacked study skills and found it difficult adjusting to student life. Many struggled to balance other commitments, notably childcare and paid work, with study. As a result, mature students were often less able to engage socially with their coursemates and take up extracurricular opportunities. Differences in outlook between mature and young students was another barrier to integration between the two groups.

Participants' experiences of support varied. Several commented that they found it difficult to locate support when they needed it and felt that the range of services available could be better promoted. However, once they had accessed the support, mature students' experience of it was usually positive and they felt generally well supported by the university.

As well as smaller improvements to existing services, the focus groups identified three key areas where additional support could be provided:

- Tailored induction activities and social activities for mature students
- Tailored accommodation support for mature students
- Tailored careers and placement support for mature students

Recommendations

A total of 8 recommendations have come from this research:

Pre-enrolment

1. Increase the use of mature students in imagery and use student comms to highlight the proportion of UWE students who start their studies later in life
2. University and SU to review access to childcare for student parents and ensure the options are clearly communicated

Induction

3. Tailored induction sessions for mature students and those who have spent time out of education
4. Increase the number of freshers' events aimed at mature students

Student experience

5. Review accommodation support offer for mature students and ways to integrate students living in private-rented
6. SU to review and promote mature student society
7. Clearer communication of all support options available to mature students at UWE
8. Tailored careers support for mature students who may be studying to pursue a career change and those wishing to access internships/placements

Introduction

Mature students, defined as those who commence higher education (HE) at 21 years or older (Office for Students, 2020), currently represent approximately half of the undergraduate student population studying in the UK (HESA, 2019). Although treated as a homogenous group, the mature student population is highly diverse, comprising of individuals from a variety of backgrounds with unique life experiences (Million+ and NUS, 2012). In addition, mature students are more likely to have other characteristics that are underrepresented in HE, such as having a lower socio-economic status, being from black and minority ethnic groups, and having known disabilities (Million+ and NUS, 2012). As such, mature students may require different support in comparison to their younger counterparts, who enter HE immediately after completing compulsory education and are under the age of 21 upon entry (Woodfield, 2011).

Despite researchers recognising the diverse characteristics and needs of mature students, they are still insufficiently understood and provided for within HE institutions (Mallman and Lee, 2016). This lack of provision may in part be reflected by the disparity in degree

outcomes obtained by traditional-aged students and mature students, known as the degree attainment gap (AdvanceHE, 2018). As students entering HE are supposed to have equal opportunities, the proportion of students achieving “good honours” degrees (2:1 honours and above) should be equal across all demographics. However, the reality is that as age increases, the proportion of undergraduates receiving a 2:1 or above decreases.

Furthermore, research shows that mature undergraduate students are two times more likely to withdraw from study between the first and second year (Million+ and NUS, 2012).

At UWE, 24% of students (Home/EU, Full time and Part time, First Degree) were aged 21 and above in the 2019/20 intake. When including international students, this figure rises to 27%. The data shows the attainment gap between mature and young students (Home/EU, Full time) in 2018/19 was 8.7 percentage points. This is the second largest attainment gap for a demographic group at UWE, after ethnicity.

Mature students, therefore, are a population that requires attention. In recognition of this issue, the current research was conducted by the EDI team to understand the barriers faced by mature students and what can be done to address them. From reviewing the extant literature, there are five recurring themes: dual identities; imposter syndrome and self-doubt; balancing commitments; adapting to education; and different attitudes.

Research questions

The present research sought to understand whether mature students at UWE Bristol faced the same barriers as those found in the literature. The research questions were:

1. What is the lived experience of mature Undergraduate students at UWE Bristol?
2. How well does the University and Students’ Union support mature students?
3. How do students feel this support could be improved?

Method

This study sought to better understand the lived experience of mature students through a series of focus groups. These focus groups explored a range of topics including participants identity as a mature student, experiences of support and experiences of social and extra-curricular activities. The questions were designed to find out how well UWE currently supports mature students and to identify ways in which this support could be improved. The research was approved by the University Research Ethics Committee.

Participants were a self-selecting sample recruited via lecture shout outs, posters around campus, social media posts, student news articles and lecturer recommendation throughout February and March 2020. Students were initially asked to complete a sign-up survey to register their interest and select their availability for a focus group. In total, 64 students completed the sign-up survey and 8 focus group sessions were scheduled, to allow for participant drop out.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic 6 focus groups took place with a total of 17 participants. These focus groups lasted for between 40 minutes and 1hour 45 minutes. The final two focus groups were cancelled due to the closure of the university campus so an online survey was sent to the remaining participants containing similar questions to those asked in the focus group. The survey had 22 responses, bringing the total number of participants to 39.

Participants

The table below summarises the participant characteristics compared to the UWE population. This shows that the sample had an over-representation of females and disabled students and an even representation of ethnicity.

Characteristic	UWE population 19/20	Sample	Percentage point difference
Gender - female	52%	64%	+12pp
Ethnicity – White	81%	82%	+1pp
Ethnicity – BAME	19%	18%	-1pp
Disabled	16%	33%	+17pp

Participants came from all faculties and campuses, although the majority were based at Frenchay campus (69%). The participants had a range of ages, with 16 aged 21-24 (41%), 8 aged 25-29 (21%) and 15 aged 30+ (38%). The majority of participants were in their first year of study (54%) and 13 (33%) participants indicated that they have caring responsibilities. Participants who took part were given a £10 Amazon voucher as a thank you for their time.

The focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim before being analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Findings

Theme 1: Lived experience of mature students

Adjusting to student life

Many students had experienced a period of adjustment when starting their studies. For several students the lack of structure compared to a job meant that time management was initially a challenge:

“It’s quite difficult to adjust; you get used to different styles. Even though I think uni is actually easier in some ways. Because if you’re working you’re, you know, you get up, seven, you work, like, half-eight all the way to five...Yes, I was working, like, 13-hour days, which sounds hard but then you come to uni and you’ve got to do it yourself. You don’t have to do it. It’s up to you whether you sit down and read it.”

In addition to a change in routine, some students who had spent time out of education felt they lacked the study skills needed to engage with their course:

“The first time I looked at a blank page (when preparing for my first essay) I was filled with fear! I had no idea how to start, or even how to write. It was a humbling experience.”

The financial impact of moving out of the workplace and into the classroom also affected the lifestyle of some students:

“I feel like the financial differences have kind of hit me hard, you know, in terms of I have nowhere near the disposable income I had when I used to have a job in Bristol. So all of a sudden I've gone from having a lot of free- I got a lot of, you know, money to put towards stuff to just not having any because it just all goes towards food and transport.”

For some, the difficulties in adjusting to university study led to feelings of self-doubt and a lack of sense of belonging:

“For a week or so I was like, oh, I can't do this. I'm too old. You know?”

Even once these initial challenges had been overcome, many mature students felt they faced difficulties that their younger peers did not. In particular, students often juggled study with other responsibilities such as childcare and paid work:

“Balancing study, work and home-life is a daily challenge. I hold myself up to a very high standard, so feel I should always be pushing my work to the highest level. However, that can become very draining when I am trying to give 110% at work, home and uni. I can come close to burn out.”

“Kids! Kids! Kids - a lot of us have kids so studying is hard and needs a lot of extra arranging to be at uni and do the work outside of uni.”

For some, these additional commitments made it difficult to engage with extracurricular activities:

“I am limited to the amount of work I can do and that includes volunteering, so if I have to choose between funding myself and volunteering. I am unfortunately going to have to fund my studies, so that limits my volunteering opportunities.”

“I thought there would be lots of groups I could join if I wanted, this has been true. I haven't felt I have had much time to enjoy this due to studying.”

Barriers for mature students to engage socially

Mature students often found it difficult to engage socially with their course mates. One issue was having different interests than younger students:

“I think socially it's kind of difficult for me – finding people in my – not necessarily being 30 but mature people to hang out with or even discuss things – you know, talk about different things. It's kind of difficult to find.”

For a number of respondents, this feeling of difference manifested itself very early on:

“I sometimes feel that Freshers Week is so focused on the young and just absolutely getting rat assed and making asses of yourselves that they sometimes forget that actually there’s a lot of older students that do like to socialise but not in the way that is presented, do you know what I mean? So yes, I think that could have helped massively if there was more social stuff for mature students at Freshers so we could all meet, go oh, hello.”

Not being able to develop social connections resulted in some mature students feeling isolated and like they didn’t belong:

“I’m one of those people that I just come, I do my stuff and you know, that’s pretty much where it ends. I don’t feel I belong to anything; I don’t feel like I belong to my cohort. I don’t feel like I belong to my set, like, I don’t sort of like identify myself as a UWE student. It’s kind of like a means to an end to get to where I want to because, maybe because that support isn’t there and the inclusiveness that I just feel, like, yes, it’s just not there.”

Despite the barriers faced by some students, others still managed to make friends on their course:

“It’s just I have found people that I can be social with in a way that I am comfortable which I find very, I am very lucky that I can find that group of people where I work, I am kind of the same wavelength, but what I expected and what reality was like differed night and day.”

“I had no expectations to be social as I have a family at home and commute a long way to come to university. I had expected to make probably a few very good friends and this is something that has happened. I had not expected to find so many younger students that I would make very good friendships with, but I have and this has been a nice surprise.”

Integration of young and mature

Some mature students were acutely aware of the differences between themselves and younger students. For example, styles of communication differed between the generations:

“The way in which they communicate and use of language is different than what I am used to and it’s difficult talking to them and engaging with them if it’s not. There’s very little actual face to face communication. They are always on their phones.”

Respondents also spoke about the challenges they had encountered when working on team projects with younger students:

“But when you have a group project for, like, a coursework group based project, it’s very difficult because eventually you’re going to be put together with students relatively younger than you and you still need to try to be able to present your ideas in a way they will hopefully accept. But the problems arise when they don’t accept because they’re immature. And even if I’m right saying things and how things should be done and we should go for that or this or we should do this way, eventually you’re just going to get rejected straightaway because, no, you’re an outsider, regardless of [whether] they know the exact age or not of the person.”

However, this wasn’t the case for everybody and there were examples of mature and young students working together harmoniously:

“In my last group project, there was me, a guy who’s 32 and one of the guys is, like, 18, and, yes, we did really well – we got a really good mark and worked really well as a team, so it doesn’t really- it’s not really an issue; you just get on with everyone.”

There was a general consensus that mature students took their studies more seriously, which sometimes led to feelings of division:

“I think we just, as mature students, come in with better direction. Not necessarily that we’re more ambitious but we’re a bit more focused on where we’re going because we’ve come here for a reason and we know what we want outside of it. So there can be conflict with some of the younger students.”

Raising awareness that some people may choose to enter HE later in life was suggested as a way to bridge the gap, as was highlighting the value of maturity:

“I’m a mature student but I can also bring – we can also bring – a lot to the younger generation because we have got life experiences, you know, yourself, you know, you might live with your girlfriend but living alone brings those experiences that all the others don’t have and it’s valuable, you know. I think we’re not tapped enough.”

“The only thing we will have is maybe to educate those eighteen year olds that some people take their time in choosing what they want to do and there’s no need to judge them.”

Theme 2: Students’ experiences of support

Varied experiences of support

Feedback about the level of support students had encountered during their time at UWE varied, with some students feeling very well supported and others less so. There were a number of comments praising the overall level of support students had experienced:

“Nothing could have prepared me for the support I received as of yet. I honestly don’t have words. It’s just more than I ever could have expected or am used to receiving especially at university level.”

“Having dropped out of education when I was younger due to what I now see as lack of support, I have been extremely happy with the support on offer at UWE. The quality and variety of support is excellent.”

However, a number of participants commented that they often struggled to find the support they needed. They felt that the support offered should be better communicated so that students in need of help do not have to spend a long time searching for it:

“I feel like UWE does really give you a lot; it’s just sometimes it’s like a bit more digging to get to it and others, like, some people didn’t even know where their APT location was within the [my UWE], or if it’s study skills.”

“[There should be] more information at the start of people’s studies. Better signposting. It took me a lot of time finding all the services. In the case of DSA, it took me a long time to

work out how to access it...I feel that it is hard to be able to identify and locate what support services are available to anyone as a student."

Support is there if you go looking for it

Academic support

In terms of academic support, several students were very positive about their lecturers. Specifically, students appreciated tailored feedback and meeting with academic staff on a 1-to-1 basis:

"I found the information they give back about what we've done, the detail that we've got back from each of the assignments and stuff like that has been excellent and then we also get the opportunity to go and talk on a one to one feedback as well. So you can't ask for anything more than that."

There were also several examples of lecturers providing excellent pastoral support, which students felt went above and beyond their academic role:

"I went through some hard times, missed quite a few lectures, and then when I did reach out for help it was amazing. And even on a personal level I was going through another legal proceeding and I was just stuck. I was crying. I went to my lecturer and I was like, I'm sorry but I really need help. And she just said, okay, here's one lawyer, here's the other lawyer, the other, and I went to them and they just treated me like a client. And student advisors as well, something else I'm going through. Yes, yes. It's really, really great support here."

Not all mature students had experienced such strong support, and in particular several students were disappointed about their academic personal tutor (APT). The most common complaints related to a lack of interaction with the APT and a feeling that the APT didn't care about the student:

"I think the APT support isn't there for me. I don't know, there's been numerous complaints about the one that I have personally that she's just not, you know, you ask her a question, she'll take days to respond and then it's like a really sharp response and it's like she doesn't really care. So I've started going to a different APT because she's more approachable, so I'm getting the kind of support that I need there but I shouldn't have to which is a shame."

Several students had engaged with peer assisted learning (PAL), but not all of them had found it helpful. For some, the problem was that the sessions hadn't happened as regularly as they should have, whereas others felt the sessions themselves had little value:

"...we're supposed to have PAL with like, Year Twos, we just don't interact with each other either, as I said, it's probably because they're really busy on placement, we're really busy on placement."

"It's a good idea but the delivery is just someone sitting there and it's not very helpful. It could improve...You can't ask the question what do you think about this? And they say, oh, I actually can't teach you this because it might be different with what the lecturer is saying."

Other students had found PAL sessions more helpful:

“I definitely have the frequent flyer miles for that [PAL] because not everybody turns up for that which is disappointing for the girls that [run it] but I have really enjoyed it and actually after I have come out of here I am going to be filling out the forms to put myself forward for next year for doing it because I mentioned it to one of my lecturers who then has actually just given me an email going, are you going to do it as I think you would do really well so the PAL stuff has been really good.”

The Students' Union

Students had mixed experiences of the Students' Union (SU). Those with positive views praised the range of social activities available through the SU, as well as the quality of support and advice on offer:

“The fact that they have the activities and the job shop and the accommodation services and when you go upstairs the presidents were all sat there, and they have the individual photos and what they are and its always open, it's always friendly.”

“The Students' Union in particular have been super helpful whenever needed, even to the point of helping me get a job to support my studies when I needed it.”

Some students who had more negative views of the SU felt that activities and events were targeted at younger students, and weren't relevant to them:

“It has its faults for sure. Especially when trying to engage with mature students. It almost feels like all events are targeted to the younger audience and not much is done to engage older students.”

Others hadn't felt the need to use the support services the SU has on offer:

“I've never really used the Students' Union. I don't feel I've needed to, in that respect. With living local, you know, I don't have that- those sort of problems and issues that maybe living away from home you would feel a little bit more benefit and a little bit more of someone on your side there with you.”

A number of participants also commented on the difference between the SU on Glenside campus compared to Frenchay campus, suggesting that money and resources are focused at Frenchay campus and other campuses are an afterthought:

“I have not really used it however I know a lot goes on in the Frenchay SU. The Students' Union on Glenside feels unloved and unvalued by everyone, it has been left to decay and run down. I know it is a smaller campus but areas could be better set up and kept more appealing to entice students into the building.”

Other support services

Many of the students had accessed one or more of UWE's support services, and overall their experiences had been positive. Several participants commented on the library:

“The study skill sessions at the library are very helpful and have played an important part in my understanding of certain topics. There is also an opportunity to ask the librarian questions regards subjects you're needing help with.”

“The librarians have been amazing, like even not just the general stuff of helping you to use the searches and stuff like that but some of the specific stuff. I was really quite amazed at one of the things that I was doing in group work where we were trying to find some statistics on something and just was totally swamped by stuff we got back from the standard searches. One of the librarians was really, really good at being able to go away and then find a few places for us to start from that were much more sort of focused and that was really good.”

A number of mature students had also accessed UWE’s wellbeing services, and the majority of these had received high quality support:

“I have accessed the university’s wellbeing services. Again, not something I am used to. So far, the experience has been really great, very neutral, not looking odd at you because you are a bit older than the general population that comes in.”

“I struggled with mental health difficulties whilst at UWE and found their wellbeing and disability services incredible support for me. They are very responsive and do seriously have an interest in your wellbeing.”

Although the support received in sessions was generally considered to be good, some students had experienced issues with accessing the wellbeing service. In some cases this had led to further distress:

“I do have issues with access, especially the wellbeing service, the waiting list is outrageous and when my wellbeing practitioner left the service (which happened twice) I had to be waitlisted again! Something I find strange and was always distressing.”

“The support I received [from the wellbeing service] was good until they implemented the six session thing. It made me feel like I was being pushed out of the service and therefore no longer attend sessions.”

A similar picture emerged for disability services, with some students struggling to access the service:

“I attempted to book a dyslexia test, but they were never able to fit me in. They said I was on a waiting list, but I never heard anything. I then didn't follow it through as I felt I was plodding along ok.”

However when students did access the service, most reported that their experience had been positive:

“I have had amazing support. My Spld tutors have helped me with getting to grips with how I study and ways to get around the problems I have due to my dyslexia and ADHD. Disability service as a whole exceeded my expectations and I have nothing but praise for them.”

Finally, some mature students had been supported by UWE Cares, and commented on the high quality of support they had received:

“I cannot sing the praises of UWE Cares enough. [The UWE Cares team] are understanding and supportive and create a safe space for those of us who fit their criteria. For the university to provide this service really makes me feel they care.”

Theme 3: Suggestions for additional support

Social space for mature students

Respondents proposed a number of improvements and additions to the support package available at UWE. As many students had found it difficult to transition from working full time to studying, one participant suggested introducing tailored induction activities for mature students:

“Have support sessions geared towards supporting career changers helping them to acclimatise to the change and integrate more into university life.”

Students who had struggled to make social connections with younger students suggested setting up a society and events for mature students to make it easier for them to socialise:

“There could be a forum for mature students, or a mature students’ society so that they can all meet up and become friends with people closer to their own age.”

“If people are spending their entire week at uni and they’ve just got, like, stuff coming out of their ears and then they go home and weekends maybe if they’ve just got kids, kids and washing and cleaning and cooking and, you know, if there was an opportunity to do events or anything else that they could put on, on a weekend, they’ll say look bring your kids, that’s fine, it could make a difference between somebody sort of like feeling like there is support outside of uni hours.”

Specific accommodation support or mature students

Many mature students live off campus, but for those living in university accommodation, sharing with other mature students was preferable:

“I think the one that I would highlight still is accommodation for mature students only. Not a mix-up. So, yes, you can have two [mature students] and then you have two 18 years old, no thank you. Like, only for, like, age-restricted or limited would be very good, I think.”

Career and placement support from UWE

Given that mature students were often studying to gain skills to further their career, there were a number of comments about improving the careers support at UWE. One suggestion was providing a more personalised service to final year students:

“Maybe more of a tailored career service to final year students, maybe, to help them see their skillset and tailor them to careers and actually match what they’ve got... Instead of just going, right, go and look at some stuff and apply.”

There was also the suggestion that students were given opportunities to make links with local businesses:

“But what would be amazing is to even if just with local businesses, and you don't need to go any further than, you know, I don't know, local businesses, really, but just something, just bring those people in and hire the students that, you know, are here and ready to take on the initiative. That would be really, really good and I think it would be very helpful as well from an employability perspective.”

“There are all these local businesses and UWE talks about community and about improving your local economy, but they’re not using the smaller start-ups and stuff that are here and taking advantage of that.”

Several students reflected on ways to make it easier for them to access internships and placements. One mature student proposed incorporating these opportunities into the academic year:

“Unfortunately for me an internship or placement year isn't something I would even consider however if there were opportunities to experience these things within the university year and not having to take an entire year to do so.”

Providing financial support to mature students would also make it easier for them to access these opportunities:

“Make the placements such a Fiji or China or Vietnam affordable or open up more placements available for care givers with bursaries. Or maybe make available sponsored placements available for care givers.”

Discussion

The research highlights the multiple barriers that exist for mature students to fully engage with university life. Students’ experiences of support were varied but the research identified some areas where this support could be improved.

In regards to the mature students’ lived experience, the participants in this sample experienced challenges in adjusting to study that typically wouldn’t be faced by those coming to university straight from school or college. These challenges included self-perceived lack of study skills, adapting to a new routine and feeling different to the rest of their cohort. This transition could be made easier with tailored induction support for those returning to study after time away.

Participants reported an expectation of ageism before they started their course and a sense of not fitting the traditional student image. This led to feelings of isolation and not belonging to the university, which research shows can impact negatively on student

outcomes (Thomas, 2012). This feeling of difference led to self-doubt among many of the participants, both in terms of their belief in their ability to succeed at university and their confidence in the decision to return to education. UWE could increase the use of mature student imagery in student communications and marketing to be more representative of the student body, as 27% of all UWE Undergraduate students are aged over 21 on entry.

Mature students found it difficult to engage socially due to two key barriers: lack of childcare provision and different social preferences. Childcare was a real issue for many participants and required a great deal of organisation and time management. Younger students didn't always understand that mature students with caring responsibilities would need several days or weeks' notice before a social event so that they could arrange childcare and be able to attend. As many social events were planned last-minute, mature students felt that they were missing out and this increased their feelings of isolation. Many participants also suggested that improved childcare facilities on campus would enable them to engage with their course and extra-curricular activities. UWE could review access to childcare on campus for student parents and ensure the options are clearly communicated.

Even when mature students were able to engage socially, their preferences were sometimes different to their younger peers, for example preferring a drink and a pizza to a bar crawl and night out. Participants felt in particular that the social activities run by the university and SU were not appealing or age-appropriate for mature students. Whilst UWE does have a mature student society and freshers' activities that are alcohol-free, more could be done to increase the visibility of these options. The mature student society is not currently an active society despite many participants saying that they would be interested in meeting other mature students. The SU and university could work together to ensure a broader range of activities are provided during freshers and via the society that include mature student preferences.

The experience of integrating young and mature students was varied. Some participants felt that their age-related experience was valued and that their differences were accepted and celebrated. Others had difficulty finding common ground with young students, often experiencing judgement from younger students before getting to know them. In general, younger mature students were better able to integrate with their cohort. One key difference between young and mature students was their attitude to education, with mature students feeling that they were taking their studies more seriously and getting greater fulfilment from their course.

Student experience of support was varied. For some students, the support provision at UWE was outstanding and far exceeded their expectations. Others reporting difficulties in navigating the various support options and being unaware of some of the options available. However, for most students, support was there if they knew where to find it. Based on this finding, more needs to be done to communicate the support offer to help students to find the support that they need.

Academic staff were praised for going above and beyond their role to provide pastoral support to students and they were often the first point of contact for students who needed

help. There were mixed responses about the APT system however, and apparent inconsistencies in the level of support received on different courses. Similarly, there were mixed views about the Students' Union, with some very positive experiences of support and others not feeling that the SU was targeted towards mature students.

The participants identified a number of improvements to support that they would like to see implemented. Firstly, the desire to have specific accommodation support for mature students, particularly for those living off-campus to feel connected to UWE. In addition to this, participants would have liked the option to be matched with other mature students when selecting first year accommodation. They would also like specific induction sessions tailored to mature students, providing information about time management, balancing childcare and study skills support. There was also a desire to create a sense of community for mature students through an active mature student society or network to increase the opportunity to meet other mature students. Finally, participants wanted tailored career and placement support, particularly for those who are studying to enable a career change. Students would value the opportunity to connect with local employers to enhance their employability skills.

To conclude, the research has identified areas of excellence in relation to mature student's experiences at UWE as well as areas for improvement. The majority of participants were impressed with the support offer at UWE and found their fellow students to be welcoming and accepting. Despite this, most participants expressed feelings of loneliness or isolation at some point in their university experience and a sense of not belonging, related to their situation as a mature student. The findings align with the recurring themes found in the literature: dual identities; imposter syndrome and self-doubt; balancing commitments; adapting to education; and different attitudes. The research also adds to this evidence base by identifying student-led recommendations.

Whilst the sample was small ($n = 39$) it did comprise a range of different ages, genders and ethnicities, ensuring that a variety of perspectives were included. This research shines a light on a large proportion of the student body who face additional barriers in accessing and succeeding at university. By removing some of these barriers and facilitating a sense of belonging to the institution, UWE could work towards closing the age attainment gap.

Recommendations

Pre-enrolment

1. Increase the use of mature students in imagery and use student comms to highlight the proportion of UWE students who start their studies later in life
2. University and SU to review access to childcare for student parents and ensure the options are clearly communicated

Induction

3. Tailored induction sessions for mature students and those who have spent time out of education

4. Increase the number of freshers' events aimed at mature students

Student experience

5. Review accommodation support offer for mature students and ways to integrate students living in private-rented
6. SU to review and promote mature student society
7. Clearer communication of all support options available to mature students at UWE
8. Tailored careers support for mature students who may be studying to pursue a career change and those wishing to access internships/placements

References

- AdvanceHE (2018) *Equality in higher education: students statistical report 2018*. York: AdvanceHE. Available from: <https://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/equality-higher-education-statistical-report-2018/> [Accessed 14 January 2020].
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. Available from: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa> [Accessed 21 August 2020]
- Higher Education Statistics Agency (2019) *Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2017/18 – Student numbers and characteristics*. Available from: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/17-01-2019/sb252-higher-education-student-statistics/numbers> [Accessed 14 January 2020].
- Mallman, M. and Lee, H. (2016) Stigmatised learners: mature-age students negotiating university culture. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* [online]. 37 (5), pp. 684-701. [Accessed 14 January 2020].
- Million+ and National Union of Students (2012) *Never Too Late To Learn: Mature students in higher education*. London: Million+. Available from: http://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/Never_Too_Late_To_Learn_-_FINAL_REPORT.pdf [Accessed 14 January 2020].
- Office for Students (2020) *Mature Learners*. Available from: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/evaluation-and-effective-practice/mature-learners/> [Accessed 14 January 2020].
- Thomas L (2012) *What Works? Student Retention & Success Summary Report*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Hefce, HEA and Action on Access. Available from: <https://www.phf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/What-Works-Summary-report.pdf> [Accessed 21 August 2020]
- Woodfield, R. (2011) Age and first destination employment from UK universities: are mature students disadvantaged? *Studies in Higher Education* [online]. 37 (4), pp. 409-425. [Accessed 14 January 2020].

Appendix a – focus group questions

1. What do you understand by the term 'mature student'?
 - a. Do you think of yourself as a 'mature student'?
2. In your experience, what are the similarities and differences between mature students and young students?
 - a. Do you relate to the other people on your course?
3. What was your main reason for starting your course?
4. How did you find adjusting to studying again after a break from education?
5. Before you started your course, what was your expectation about the support you would get with your studies?
 - a. How does your experience compare to your expectation?
6. What support have you accessed on your course? E.g. PAL, library study skills, APT.
 - a. Has this met your needs?
7. Are there other support services you have accessed at UWE outside of your course? E.g. wellbeing, health service, accommodation.
 - a. What was your experience?
8. How could UWE improve the support offered to mature students?
9. Before you started your course, what was your expectation about the social aspect of being a student?
 - a. How does your experience compare to your expectation?
10. What is your perception of the Student's Union? Do you engage with SU activities?
 - a. Does the SU offer opportunities that interest you?
11. Have you engaged with extra-curricular opportunities such as internships and placements?
 - a. If not, what could the university do to enable you to engage in these opportunities?
12. How prepared do you feel for your future after you have graduated?
13. To what extent do you feel that you belong at UWE? Do you feel part of the UWE community?
14. What was your reason for taking part in this focus group today?

Appendix b- thematic map

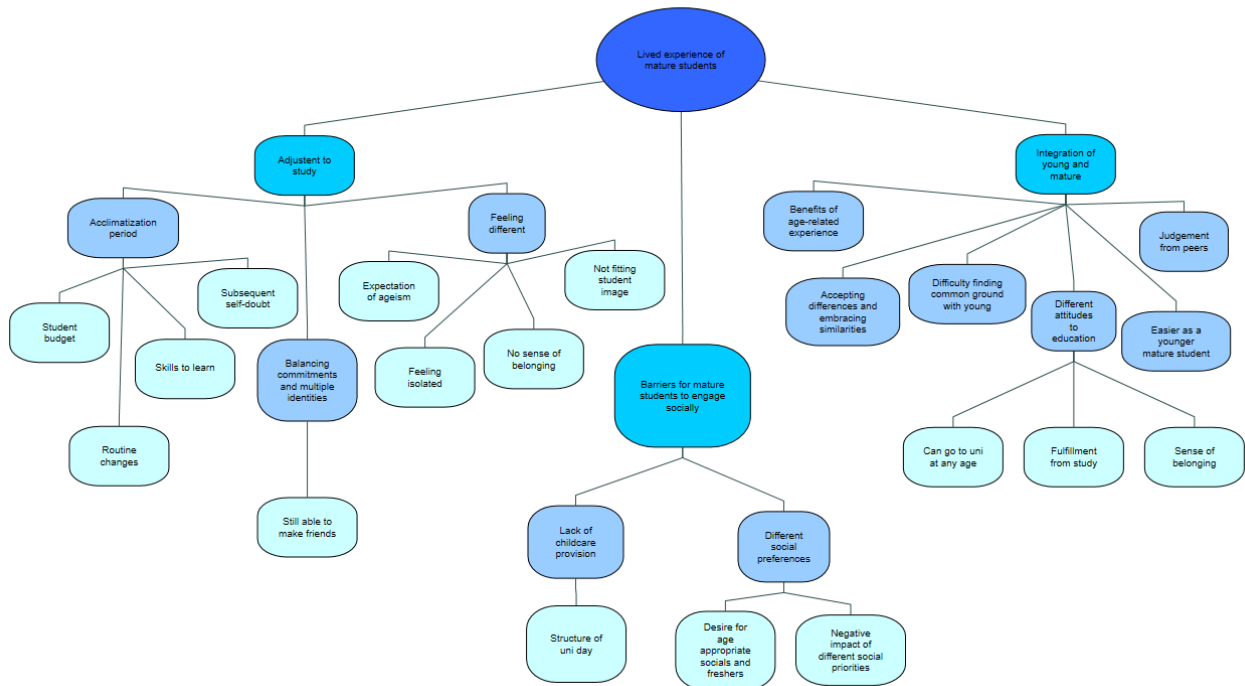


Figure 1. Thematic map of theme 1 'Lived Experience of Mature Students'

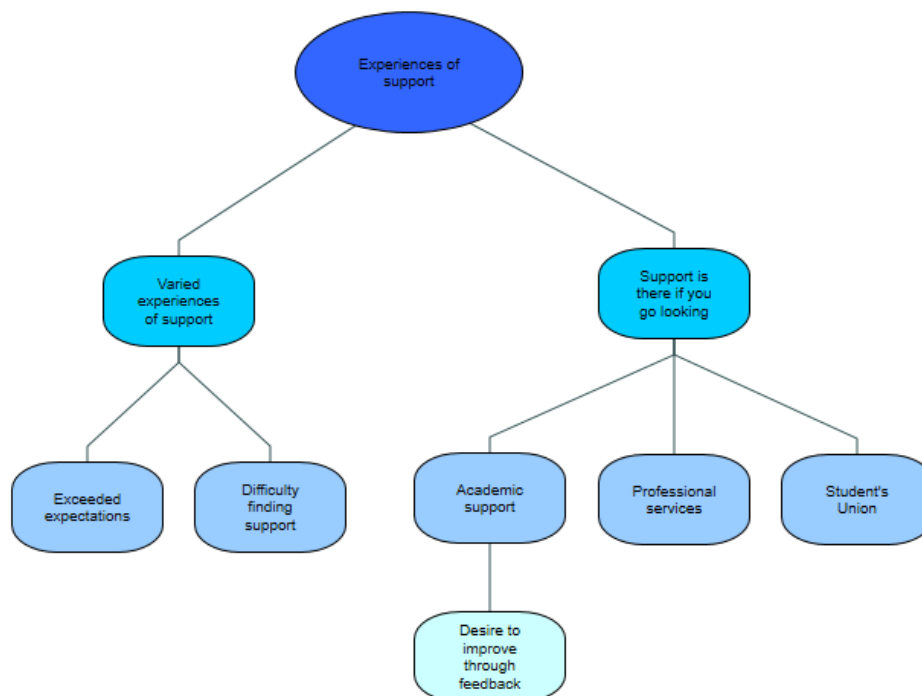


Figure 2. Thematic map of theme 2 'Experiences of Support'

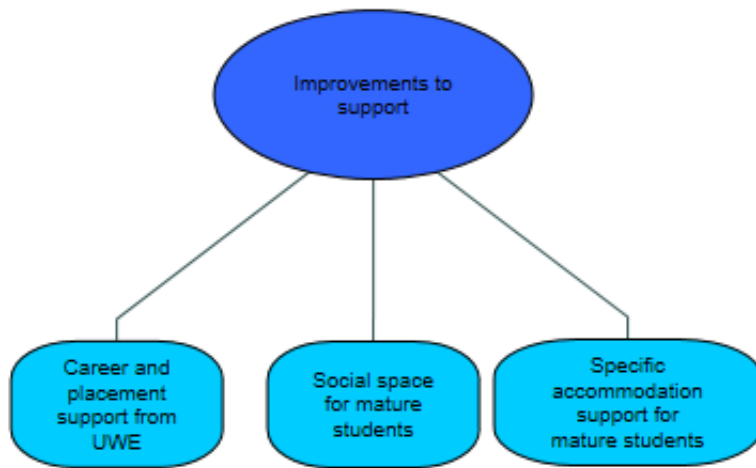


Figure 3. Thematic map of theme 3 'Improvements to support'