Overcoming barriers
How can HEIs attract greater numbers of mature learners?

NEON summit

Dr John Butcher

Director, Access, Open and Cross-curricula Innovation

'Mature students have not been prioritised by many providers despite low and decreasing proportions of such students in their populations and the sector more broadly'

Office for Students (2019)

Is mature a proxy for part-time?

Mature students are over 21 and face a 'Hobson's choice' - likely to need <u>part-time</u> opportunities

60% drop in part-time Undergraduates since 2012:

This contributes directly to a 16% fall in UG students from low participation areas

This means 25% fewer people in their twenties are starting HE due to the drop in part-time numbers

56% Year 1 Undergraduates over 24 were studying part-time

46% part-time undergraduate starters were 29 and under

UCAS report small recent rise in full-time mature (35+) students from a low base (mainly apprenticeships)

Some universities buck the trend

OFFA study (2017)

http://oro.open.ac.uk/50339/1/Final-Report-Understanding-the-impact-of-outreach-on-access-to-higher-education-for-disadvantaged-adult-learners-docx.pdf

Bristol University: Foundation Year in Arts & Humanities

Birkbeck University London: Social Sciences Introduction

Leeds University: Community learning pathways

Open University: Access modules & free online tasters

Mission to be open to people, places, methods and ideas…provide high quality university education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential

There are no entry requirements
- 76% of OU directly-registered students work full or part-time
- 23% of OU undergraduates live in the 25% most deprived areas
- 24,709 OU students declare disabilities
- 33% of OU students begin their studies with 1 A Level or less.

OU Access provision

- Two thirds of students study for free

- 1:1 relationship with tutor

- Each module is 30 weeks long, two start dates, 10 hours per week

- Choice of 3 x 30 credit modules at HE Level 0

- Additional optional stage in all undergraduate qualifications

- High proportion of Disabled students (30%)

- High proportion of students with low PEQs (60%)

Policy barriers

Perfect storm of ill-conceived policies

One-size-fits all assumption: that students are full-time, 18 year-old school leavers

Key barriers: **Equivalent and Lower Qualification** legislation (obstacle to up/re-skilling); **National Collaborative Outreach Programme** (funding prioritises school pupils); Increased **tuition fees** (disincentivising 'psychic cost' of a loan for mature learners unless mitigated by lifelong learning allowances and maintenance grants); distorting **metrics** (NSS, TEF, VFM/earnings).

Key opportunities: **Augar review** advocated flexible learning, bridging courses and greater financial support for lifelong learning; main **political parties** at last election pledged (variously) for 6 years of free adult study, for a skills wallet or a national skills fund – all recognising a need to stimulate a market that had failed

Fundamental to reversing the downward trend

Are policy-maker de-sensitised to student heterogeneity?

Does policy language result in deficit thinking around mature learners?

Are mature students pathologised ('othered') by being neither young nor economically privileged, and so positioned in relation to what they lack?

If WP policy focuses on barriers to transitions into HE, it needs to recognise HE is not a continuation for mature learners – it is a disruptive experience which can lead to 'dispositional imbalance'

Are policy-makers frozen into inaction by the deluge of data – do they need more stories of mature students overcoming obstacles to succeed?

Institutional barriers

What needs to be be done?

Institutional paralysis

The HE **offer** looks **second class for mature students**:

As a part-time mature student you don't feel as valued as the full-time students…you are just shoe-horned in with the full-timers…I'm basically too old…

Support needs to be **embedded** across the mature journey:

I'd been at home since I had children…just to come outside was a big thing, but then to come into a university and then to be with academics, listening to lectures and seminars…caused me quite a lot of internal anxiety…

Teaching needs to be **empathetic**:

I was frightened of my tutor's first call…I remember my old school days which didn't bring back very good memories…I never had a tutor…I was afraid I was going to get into trouble for not doing stuff

Next steps

Acknowledge the terrifying challenge of **re-engaging** with education as a mature student: Implement and embed **inclusive pedagogies**; be **flexible with timetabling** & assessment deadlines; instigate pro-active **tutor support**; provide regular **assessment feedback** on low risk tasks; **integrate disciplines** to allay 'fear factor' eg embed maths teaching in applied science

Be bold in a re-conceptualised **civic role**: review **institutional structures** through the lens of the mature student experience – identify and **challenge assumptions** about full-time young students living on campus; be aware of mature and part-time learner **issues**; develop adult learner **personas** – enable mature students to see/hear 'people like me'.

Acknowledge **mature students are transitioning** across separate worlds with no guidebook: enhance **IAG** – clear signposting from informal to formal; offer **tasters** – HE is not 'out of reach'; go to where the mature learners may be (in the **community**); recognise mature learners are likely to follow a **non-linear** study trajectory

Personal barriers

Do we listen enough?

How should we respond…

Life disruptions

Mature learners, by definition, are juggling complex lives in order to study. Most will need to keep working to pay mortgages/rent and financially support family members (especially children). Full-time employment does not align with the demands of conventional HE. Part-time HE is often insufficiently flexible to accommodate unpredictable family and work demands:

It's bloody hard…I wish I had done it when I was young…I was naïve when I took it on…

I was taken out of school when I was 15 and missed my GCSEs. Since then I have needed to work full-time and tried to study part-time, but stressful things happen when you get older. I got so far behind I got demoralised.

Can HEIs introduce far greater flexibility in their systems to enable mature students to pause and re-start as necessary, to speed-up or slow-down as appropriate, and offer a more customised system to support retention and a positive student experience (not marginalised in a structure not designed for them).

Fear of the cost

Mature students are far more likely to be debt-averse, and to worry that the personal investment in HE is too risky if outcomes (better jobs/improved pay/career path) are unpredictable and not guaranteed.

It's not feasible for me to give up work, I can't afford to go to university full-time.

Paying rent or a mortgage impacts on people's ability and their decision to invest in [part-time] education…in my late 30s, is it something that is going to have been worth the time, and the financial investment…it's people like us who have taken the impact of the fees.

Can we invest in far better signposting from informal to formal education, with easily accessible information, advice and guidance to identify financial support, and clarify pathways for those with alternative entry qualifications or following alternative routes?

What next?

Put mature students at the heart of Access and Participation Plans

OfS are giving the sector 'permission' to finally address the decline

The haemorrhaging has to stop.

Perhaps the potential impact of BREXIT and COV-19 on student numbers will force VCs to consider mature students as an opportunity – what an impact increasing numbers of committed, engaged learners with life experiences, often based locally, could have on institutions claiming a civic role:

The teacher that actually taught us (community course) is the only person that ever suggested that any of us could even think about a university. And we didn't believe her for ages either, I don't think. I mean, she just mentioned it and then we went to the study day and it just made it seem possible, 'cos it never had before.

I've got two small children, so I thought I'd never have the time to study. Now, when they go to bed, I am excited to get my study books out.

I was concerned that I wouldn't be able to study, to put in the hours…understand the question…I was struggling a bit at the start…but when you get into it, it falls into place really, and then you realise you are prepared for the next level.

Listen to the voices of those mature students who have overcome the odds to succeed

Develop a more persuasive case around the moral purpose of higher education, to help all individuals reach their potential:

I sit with my kids to do my homework and help them with theirs…I hope it rubs off on them, just showing that you're never too old to learn

I've got a three year-old – it gets you in the habit of setting aside some time to study…I did fall a bit behind when my son was ill and I had family commitments…I did catch up – it just became personal determination to see it through in the end…I've done so much in the past where I've started things and couldn't finish them…this time I really wanted to see it through.

I hit my teens and my academic life collapsed really, so my confidence dipped massively, and my brain had been stagnating. I signed up and it invigorated the love of learning that I hadn't had for about ten years. It built on things I may have missed at school…I really wanted to get back on track with my life really.

Why do we need an Access and Participation Plan?

- **Provides a strategic direction to enable equality of access and outcomes for students from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds**

- **Creates a joined-up approach which recognises faculty-specific priorities**

- **Institution-wide commitment**

- **Universities MUST draw on analysis of OfS and internal data to set ambitious targets to reduce inequitable outcomes for students with a particular focus on…MATURE learners across the student lifecycle**

- **So let's get on with meeting the expectation…**

THANK YOU

john.butcher@open.ac.uk

https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Unheard-The-voices-of-part-time-adult-learners.pdf

The Open University