

# IncludeAll – Enhancing Practice: 'Mature' Students

## What are the key issues?

We categorise students over the age of 21 as 'mature' but should be wary of using this label. A student of 18 may have a high level of maturity and someone in their 40's may not react very well to be termed 'mature'. Everyone will probably just want to be a 'student'.

The older we are the more likely we are to have competing demands on our time, but 'traditional' 18-21 year old students may also be parents, need to work whilst studying, or be caring for elderly/disabled relatives.

Around 44% of the University's student population is over 25 years of age, and although many are on part-time, distance learning, professional or postgraduate courses, many are also on full-time undergraduate courses. Typically, mature students will have more competing priorities than younger students and may be more likely to be juggling family/caring responsibilities with their studies. They are also more likely to be travelling to and from the University, often from a distance. Older students are also typically female and studying to improve their career opportunities. Often people return to post-16 education when their own children reach this stage.

Older students coming back into education may have had poor experiences at school being termed 'stupid', 'lazy' or a 'failure'. As a consequence they also may lack confidence in their ability to succeed, and this is exacerbated if it has been a while since they have engaged in formal education. Some may have completed access courses such as 'Step up to HE' to bridge this gap but others may not have come through this route. It is advisable, therefore to find out their educational background and consequent study skills requirements at the earliest opportunity within the programme. This might be similar to assessing the skills of students from FE or international students.

Personal tutors can play an important role in this process, signposting the student for additional help, if required, and ideally, well before assessment time. Putting in an appropriate support structure appropriate can help reduce anxiety about returning to formal education.

### What our students say:

*'The University has been an amazing experience as a mature student...I've received excellent support and built up confidence and knowledge.'*

(Level 6 BSc Psychology and Counselling)

Making expectations clear is essential when mature students are applying to study at university. Choices have serious consequences when you are a single parent, for example. Any pre-course literature should be explicit about what is required for studying each particular subject, and where and how study skills support can be found if gaps are recognised.

Mature students may also feel a sense of not being 'part of the University' or 'one of the group'. Whilst this does not apply to all mature students, for some the experience of being at university can feel quite isolating. Welcome Week/Induction programmes and activities therefore need to be inclusive of mature-students so that they genuinely feel welcomed. Although integration amongst all students is encouraged at the start of the award, if social contact with other mature students can be built in/arranged, it can be particularly appreciated.

According to the National Union of Students, 65% of lone parents and 60% of parents considered leaving their course (NUS, 2009). Each course is different in its student diversity so you will already be aware of the typical age range of your students and if older students might need extra support. The age of students may also, of course, alter the relationship between lecturer and student.

### What are the implications for teaching and learning?

Due to their competing demands, especially around child care, mature students appreciate knowing in advance:

- Term dates and any reading/self-study weeks and how these might fit with school terms and half terms
- Timetable and advanced notice of any changes – again for arranging care
- Any placement/fieldwork requirements
- Study requirements
- Reading lists
- Access to learning resources/library
- Nursery/breastfeeding facilities and rules about children on campus.

There may need to be in-built flexibility to study arrangements, and if teaching sessions are missed, having your lecture captured electronically is very useful. Some awards have part-time blended learning versions available, and the study material from this can be extremely useful for any full-time students who miss a session.

Older students can be more confident in voicing opinions and in some instances this conflicts with younger students who feel the older student is dominating the class.

Award teams need to be explicit about the on-entry skills, knowledge and competencies they require of learners as this is often an area in which mature students may need extra support, confidence-building and encouragement. However, be wary of making assumptions around skills and abilities -

*You were impressed by a student's essay and in order to encourage her, especially as she's had a break from formal academic study and appears to lack confidence, you commented: 'a promising piece of work especially from a mature student – please to see you're getting to grips with the IT too.'* (Attwood, 2010)

### What works really well?

In the main, apart from needing information well in advance, good inclusive practice will cover most of the needs of mature students.

If using a PBL (Problem Based Learning) approach which requires students meet between lectures to work on project tasks, be aware that some mature students might not live on or near to the University.

Acknowledging that some of your students have different life-experiences, and ideally valuing that of mature students, can be particularly re-assuring to them.

Giving early warning if teaching sessions have to be cancelled - mature students who might not live close to the University will appreciate not having to make an unnecessary journey onto campus, or make unnecessary child care arrangements.

### Further information and background reading

Attwood, R. (2010) *The Cinderella Students*, THES 10 June 2010 [online]

Longden, B. and Yorke, M. (2008) *The Experiences of Part-time Students in Higher Education: A Study from the UK*. York: HE Academy

Moreau, M. (2012) *Supporting Student Parents in HE: A Policy Analysis*. London: Nuffield Foundation.

NUS (2009) *Meet the Parents: the Experiences of Students with Children in Further and Higher Education*. London: National Union of Students.

## Checklist for reflection: Mature students



Many of these are general good practice but might act as useful reminders. Have I:

Looked at the age range of my students (especially with UG courses)?	
Been explicit at the start of the module/award as to how it will be taught?	
Wherever possible, built in time to find out the past experience of all students?	
Working with Study Skills Tutors, integrated a formative task to help identify any skills-gaps?	
Arranged group activities designed to welcome and integrate all students can at the start of the course?	
Created a safe learning environment which promotes an equal partnership ethos?	
Ensured that learning materials are available in advance through BlackBoard?	
Planned in interactive activities on BlackBoard for students who have restricted travel times? Have to travel from a distance?	
Taken into consideration students who have caring responsibilities?	

## Reflection into action

Having reflected on the above, my key priorities for making my teaching more inclusive are:



Changes to be introduced	By when	Indicators that it will make my practice more inclusive

This document is part of an inclusive practice 'toolkit' - *IncludeAll*. The whole Toolkit, as one complete document or as separate documents, can be found on the University website at [www.staffs.ac.uk/inclusivepractice](http://www.staffs.ac.uk/inclusivepractice) .

It is split into four sections: Core Concepts; Inclusive by Design; Enhancing Practice; Checklists for Self-reflection.

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