

Working with mature students

'I was 1 of only a handful of mature students, a lot of people that were on the course were 18, 19. And there was such a big difference. They used to talk the whole way through, they weren't interested in really being there ...I just thought you know we're paying quite a lot to be here, I'd quite like to do this'

Education Student

'As a mature student it's a very different experience and I find...there's not the integration that the other students have, which is understandable, which also lends itself to making group work a bit awkward.. You feel quite separate I think'

History Student

Questions for reflection

1. What do you think some of the implications might be, positive and negative, of being a mature student studying your course?
2. How could universities, academic staff and fellow students support mature students to feel included within the university community and to succeed in their studies?
3. What could you do in your role?

Discussion

Students who are over 21 at the start of their course are defined as mature. Yet this encompasses a broad age range, all of whom may have different experiences of studying in higher education. In the examples above, the mature student in the first quote felt she was more invested in her studies than her younger colleagues and that made making friends difficult. In the second quote, the student was in a course where mature students were in the minority and because of this found group work awkward. The mature students we spoke to in our interviews also raised issues about balancing parenting and study, managing finances and feeling excluded from the social activities and experiences of their fellow students.

Suggestions for good practice

- Those returning to learning after a period of study may not have A-level knowledge fresh in their minds but may have other relevant professional experiences. Be aware of the different entry qualifications into your course and what these entail.
- Provide flexibility in the way students can contact you such as by email, recognising that those with additional commitments may not be able to attend your office hours.

- Upload lecture notes online through the Digital Learning Environment, so that students can easily catch up if they occasionally have difficulty making the class.
- Provide opportunities in group tasks for mature students to demonstrate their experience and expertise (where they wish to and where this is relevant to the course).
- Recognise and value your students by approaching teaching sessions with an ethos of partnership, where both students and staff are seen as belonging to a community of learners.
- Students in their 20s may feel very different to those in their 40s. Don't assume students see themselves as 'mature' and avoid using that label unless you are confident that the student is happy to use it.
- Opportunities to work in small groups can make it easier for students to get to know each other and ease social integration. Provide opportunities for small group discussion and, where appropriate, mix up the groups occasionally to avoid cliques forming.
- Make students aware of dedicated events and facilities for mature students such as the mature learners Facebook group and the UPSU mature students' forum.

Plymouth resources

- [Returning to study](#)

External Resources

- The University of Surrey's guide to [understanding the support needs of mature students](#)

Indicative Research

- Reay, D., Ball, S. & David. M. (2002). 'It's Taking Me a Long Time but I'll get There in the End': Mature students on access courses and higher education choice. *British Educational Research Journal* 28, 1, 5-19.
- Smith, J. (2008). *Mature learners: a synthesis of research*. York: Higher Education Academy:
- Stevenson, J. & Clegg, S. (2013). 'My past is a double edge sword': temporality and reflexivity in mature learners, *Studies in Continuing Education* 35,1, 17-29