Mature learners: a synthesis of research
Judith Smith (2008)

Mature students are usually defined by the age they enter higher education (HE). For statistical purposes the Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) defines the category ‘as those who are aged 21 or over, at 30 September of the academic year in which they are recorded as entering the institution’.

Explanatory Context

The term ‘mature student’ identifies a category of learners who embark on a course of study later in life than those who enter HE directly after full-time schooling, usually at 18/19 years old. The mature learners are differentiated from school leavers in that, prior to HE entry, they have accrued significant life experience either in the labour market or in a domestic setting.

Mature students study full-time, part-time or are distance learners, and in this respect are indistinguishable from younger learners. However, they are more likely to study part-time higher education than younger age groups. The normal entry requirements for school-leavers wishing to start an undergraduate degree are often not applied to mature students although this varies across and within institutions. Local partnership progression agreements between Further Education (FE) colleges and universities may include admission policies to support mature students.

The term ‘mature student’ is not used exclusively by higher education. Older learners embarking on any education programme in adult education, further education and/or higher education are similarly categorised. Although mature learners in higher education are sometimes referred to as non-traditional learners or non-standard entrants, these definitions rest on the assumption that institutions have a norm or a ‘traditional’ clientele, an assumption that is increasingly debatable within the context of increasing diversity across the sector. There have, however, been a number of associated policies aimed at identifying this group for particular sources of funding and financial support.

Mature students are sometimes referred to as adult returners or even adult or older learners. The term ‘adult returner’ is also ill-defined and includes any adult entering learning provision at any level of learning. Thus with respect to higher education this includes those who have no prior experience of higher education and are embarking on undergraduate level study for the first time, and also those who may have incomplete qualifications and are returning to HE for further study,
including at post-graduate level.

The age at which students are defined as mature has been contested, with some researchers suggesting the category should be those students embarking on HE over the age of 25 as this puts a time space between those students who have recently left full-time schooling and those that are restarting their education. The suggestion is that there are different categories of learners such as 'young mature learners' i.e. those aged between 21-24 yrs on entry and 'older mature learners' categorised as those over 25 years.

Sometimes the older learners are referred to as 'lifelong learners' but, again, the term lifelong learning holds different meanings in different contexts, particularly related to the entry point or the level of learning and the educational institution the student is studying at. Learners aged over 50 years are sometimes referred to as 'Third Age' learners. Learners in this category are generally considered to be undertaking higher level learning for its own sake rather than to support career or employment progression. A growing group of mature learners are those who enter higher education through work-related learning routes and may be defined as work-based learners or work-place learners.

The increase in participation in higher education towards what is often referred to as a level of massification included an associated rise in the numbers of mature students. Between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s the numbers of mature entrants to full-time undergraduate programmes doubled from 150,000 to just over 300,000 annually. In the last decade, however, since the introduction of tuition fees in 1998, there has been a slowing down in rates of participation. Recent statistical returns on new entrants indicate that there were approximately 350,000 mature entrants to under-graduate programmes in 2005/06 including 72,000 on full-time programmes and 282,000 on part-time programmes (HESA 2008). In 2005/06 approximately 20% of new entrants to HE were over 21 years old.

Any analysis of mature learners' applications to HE has to acknowledge the limitations of the statistics which are generally collated from UCAS data. There is a substantial number of older learners who do not apply to HE through the UCAS route but apply directly to the HE provider. This is particularly the case for part-time learners, thus any longitudinal assessment of participation may be distorted. Equally there is little clear evidence of the socio-economic background of these learners, although HESA is beginning to collate enrolment statistics on those mature learners (over age 21 years) who enrol in HE and are living in communities where participation rates in higher education is evidentially low.

In 2005/06 over 21% of mature student entrants to full-time programmes (and 8.6% to part-time programmes) had no previous HE qualification.
and were from low participation neighbourhoods, both performance indicators for widening participation (HESA 2008). In terms of widening participation target groups the categorisation of mature learners by social class and previous family social class and experience of HE is usually undertaken on the basis of their own prior or current employment status on entry and in relation to the recorded home address. This contrasts with the position for school leavers whose social class is classified on the basis of their parents' occupation and home address. Since occupational status rises with age, this discrepancy makes it difficult to compare social class data for mature learners with that for school leavers.

Since the late 1990s the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has, as part of its widening participation strategy, provided additional funding linked to the numbers of mature students enrolled within an institution. Currently, the teaching and learning grant to HEIs includes a mature student premium to provide extra resources to support admission and retention. The assumption is that some mature students who re-enter education after a break may require additional learning support during their transition period to ensure that they acquire the skills required for HE study. The premium is designed to recognise extra costs to the institution for part time students and extra recruitment and support costs for mature students and students from low participation postcodes or with disabilities.

Nevertheless, policies toward encouraging the participation in HE of mature learners have undergone a significant change over the last decade. Whereas in the mid 1990s most institutions considered their widening participation policies to be synonymous with their policies on mature learners, this is no longer the case. Since the late 1990s, HEFCE's emphasis has turned towards increasing the participation of younger learners from lower socio-economic groups. This has been at the expense of mature learners and it should be acknowledged that there has been a general lack of attention paid to widening the participation of mature students. (Bowl 2003)

Although the Aimhigher programme has targeted people from lower socio-economic groups aged between 13 years to 30 years, the bulk of the activity has been focused on younger students in school and college. The review of Aimhigher indicates there is only small scale activity targeting the older age range of learners (HEFCE, 2006). Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland institutions receive widening access funding for targeting low participation neighbourhoods but do not reference mature students as specific target groups for increasing or widening participation.

Although there is some evidence that HEIs are undertaking activity to support mature students, there is actually only limited evidence of change in recruitment and admission policies and procedures, retention and pedagogical practice. However, mature learners are not evenly spread
The rates of participation of mature students has been associated with issues of demand and supply (Bekhradnia, 2007), and in view of an anticipated demographic downturn in the number of school leavers beyond 2010 there appear to be policy changes occurring which are an attempt to influence both demand from mature learners and supply of appropriate HE provision. Bekhradnia (2007) noted that there may be a slight increase in the mature student population owing to population projections of an increase in 22 to 30 year-olds; this group does appear to be maintaining levels of participation, whilst the over-30s are becoming a diminishing group of participants. It remains to be seen, however, if policies towards adult employees will stimulate the demand for HE and/or if new programme provision such as part-time Foundation Degrees will entice mature students in greater numbers.

It has been suggested that some of the recent policy changes toward adult education have given out contradictory messages about the value government places on adult learning and indirectly may work against increasing the levels of mature students in HE. For example, funding restrictions by the Learning and Skills Council of adult learning programmes at lower levels of entry to education have meant that most of the adult education available in local centres and colleges has become increasingly focused on formal, accredited and utilitarian qualifications (e.g. programmes that are recognised by QCA on the new National Qualifications Framework). In addition many adults now have to contribute to this type of learning. This approach has been criticised because free or subsidised informal, non-accredited provision has traditionally been seen as a first step toward encouraging adult learners back into education and the absence of such provision may result in fewer adult returners into education per se (see e.g. NIACE 2008). In addition, there was some confusion in the last few years about whether Access to Higher Education programmes came under this remit. This resulted initially in some FE colleges closing some Access to HE programmes (particularly those with a non-vocational content such as Humanities and Social science courses) although there has been some attempt to redress the funding confusion recently (HEFCE 2007). These changes, particularly in Further Education, may have some consequences on future levels of demand for HE from mature students.

The recent Leitch report into skills (Leitch 2006) identified the importance of increasing the numbers in the population with a level 4 qualification from current level of 29% to 40% by 2010. This will assist the competitiveness of the UK economy, and the Public Service Agreements (PSA) include commitments for achievement of, and access to, higher education (defined here as 'level 4 and above'). The Skills PSA Delivery is underpinned by two key indicators:
• The proportion of working age adults qualified to level 4 and above should reach 34% by 2011 and 36% by 2014.
• Increase participation in Higher Education towards 50% of those aged 18 to 30, with growth of at least a percentage point every two years to the academic year 2010/11

These targets aimed at older learners have brought a subtle change in attitude indicated in recent ministerial presentations. Recruitment of part-time adult learners has become a new strategy as recognised in recent speeches by government ministers and a government sponsored report (Denham, 2008; Rammell, 2008, Pollard et al, 2008).

Rammell, at a recent OU students Association conference, said:

We're going to need to get many more mature people into higher education over the next decade.......It's no good expecting large numbers of adults with careers, families or mortgages to behave like 18 year-olds and go off to university full-time for three or four years. It's just not going to happen. For most of the 171 higher education institutions in this country, the consequences of all that are going to be very challenging. They're going to have to enter what is, for most, very unfamiliar territory. Dealing with older, possibly more demanding and certainly more discerning students. Educating more part-timers. And more students who aren't just part-time, but who undertake most of their learning in their workplace or at home. Coping with a more varied student body, in terms of age, ethnicity, social background, prior qualifications, personal circumstances and individual aspirations. Embracing closer involvement by students' employers not just in funding higher education, but in designing and delivering it (Rammell 2008).

Although this is partly a pragmatic approach because of changing demographics, it does recognise the need of institutional change to accommodate students who are at a very different stage in their life from school leavers. As the opportunities for increasing the participation of school leavers in HE reduce, the target will shift towards those people in the existing workforce who do not currently have HE qualifications. It is estimated that there are six million people in the workforce holding qualifications at level 3, but not at Level 4, who could be encouraged to participate in HE. This research looked at the attitudes towards higher education of adults in the labour market without Level 4 qualifications - some 12 million adults. The research found that 30% of adults would consider going to university at some point in the future and that 6% were already seriously considering it. The conclusion was that this suggests there are nearly 4 million people considering, or willing to consider, higher education (DIUS 2008). If these learners are to participate in HE, employers, employees and higher education providers need to work together to appreciate each others' perspectives and to ensure that the needs of all parties are accommodated. This lies at the heart of HEFCE's
employer engagement strategy (HEFCE 2007) and the three higher level skills pilots in the North East, North West and South West of England.

Finance is central to success for mature students. Under the 2004 HE Act, part-time students in England are treated differently from full-time students and are not entitled to access income-contingent loans for tuition fees. This is a serious weakness which has not been rectified by the Government's introduction of a more generous student support package for part-time students, for which the majority of the latter do not qualify.

Part-time students still have to pay tuition fees up-front. Many universities and FECS committed to widening participation have tried to protect part-time students by charging tuition fees below the pro-rata equivalent for full-time courses. These institutions are concerned that part-time students will be unable to afford fees of up to £1500 paid up-front each year and, as a result, those HE providers who are demonstrating their commitment to widening participation by offering flexible and part-time routes to study are receiving less income than others.

Access to quality Information, advice and guidance is an essential prerequisite for adults in returning to education and progressing into HE. There has been criticism that, although there are services for those already in formal learning, the provision for those outside of full-time education has been less satisfactory. A DIUS paper *Opportunity, Employment and Progression: making skills work*, which combines welfare reform with strategies for helping people return to the job market, also outlines a proposal for an adult careers and advancement service designed to support adult returners (DIUS 2007). It remains to be seen whether this service could support mature students into HE study.

A final point on the policy agenda relates to the many mature learners who are returners to education but who already have some experience of HE achievement. Ross et al (2002) noted that up to 7% of mature HE entrants have prior HE qualifications. Recent policy toward funding learners with Equivalent or Lower Qualifications (ELQ) may mean that this group of learners will not be able to access HE in the future (HEFCE 2008a; Jamieson et al, 2007; NIACE 2007). Funding for accessing Foundation Degrees is not affected and thus there is a continuing policy focus on recruiting to these programmes, with employers sharing in more of the costs of learning.

**Key Research Reports**
In the last decade there have been few major research reports that have specifically considered the role of mature learners within higher education, although some of the key research reports into widening participation issues have included commentary on how these may relate to mature students. The following offer some relevant key evidence. All reports accessed 27/05/08:

   HEFCE, Bristol
   http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2006/06_16/

   This report describes the attributes, progression to higher education, achievement within higher education, and outcomes after graduation of students who have undertaken Access to Higher Education courses. These courses, first established in the late 1970s, remain an important route into higher education for mature entrants. Though growth in student numbers has been modest in recent years, one in four first-time mature entrants to full-time degree programmes still enter via an access course. The report tracked learners on access courses in 1998-99 and followed them through further study. It was found that more than half of those starting an access course continue with formal study, with 39 per cent progressing onto degree or other undergraduate programmes. Typically, the progression from access course to higher education involves a move from a further education college to a higher education institution (HEI). Though the access course students tend to choose an HEI near to their home, this does not mean that all students on the same access course programme go to the same HEI. The average one-year access course group will have students going to about 12 different institutions to study at higher education level. Of those who go on to higher education from access courses, most go onto full-time degree courses. They study a wide range of subjects, with 'subjects allied to medicine' being the most popular.

   Two-thirds of the students from access courses on three or four year full-time degree programmes graduate within five years. This proportion compares favourably with other 'non A-level' entrants. Further, six months after graduating, of those employed 78 per cent were in ‘graduate’ jobs. The report recognises the importance of the Access to HE programmes for supporting mature student entry and progress through higher education and also indicates the link between mature entry and widening participation to HE.

   Higher Education Policy Institute, Oxford
   http://www.hepi.ac.uk/downloads/30HEskillsandemployerengagementfull.pdf

   This report deals with the practicalities and the implications of the 2006
Leitch report into adult skills and the Government's proposals so far. It looks at elements of the emerging skills agenda - in particular, targeting older learners, employer engagement in higher education, and routes into HE for young learners with vocational qualifications. Whilst supporting the principles involved in encouraging the HE sector to work more closely with employers, some scepticism is expressed about the modelling. This raises doubts about whether the potential numbers of older learners who could be targeted for Level 4 qualifications represent realistic targets within the timeframe set by the government.

The achievement of the targets relies on influencing both demand and supply, but whilst government can influence supply through various incentive schemes to HE providers there is currently little evidence that employer and employee demand for HE is rising. One stumbling block for mature students is the current position regarding prior entry qualifications, and this will need to be challenged if the government is to ensure an increase in mature entry to HE. However, the setting of entry criteria into some HEIs is tied up with notions of quality provision and league tables and HEIs are unlikely to want to alter the current position.

The report suggests caution in moving too fast toward influencing the current demand-led HE system which on the whole works well for those who access it and for employers. Targets for employer-funded HE should be realistic and tested; planning for demand using intermediaries is unlikely to work as better outcomes are achieved when working directly with employers; co-funded provision is unlikely to occur; increasing HE participation is unlikely to address wider educational and social stratification.


This is the fourth report on demand for higher education that HEPI has published since 2003. The purpose of the report is to discuss the influences and uncertainties surrounding future HE demand, and to illustrate the impact of some of these on future numbers. A section of the report considers the position for mature and part-time learners.

The report considers the Leitch targets for increasing Level 4 provision and suggests that increases in young participation are unlikely to meet this target. Consequently, a focus on older learners is required, in particular part-time and mature students in employment. However, the report expresses scepticism about meeting these targets. The number of 22-30 year old students can be expected to increase naturally due to demographic changes, even without the effect of policy changes. But there has been barely any change recently in the proportion of part-time entrants who are 30 and over, and it is uncertain if government policy aimed at employees will impact on demand for provision developed to
increase higher level skills.

Institute for Employment Studies DIUS Research Report 08 06.DIUS
http://www.dius.gov.uk/research/documents/DIUS-RR-08-06.pdf

This study, which included a telephone survey of adults with no previous Level 4 study, considered attitudes and intentions towards higher education (HE) amongst working adults in England. The key findings were:

- Working adults see university as open to all since over 80 per cent of all responding adults agreed that 'people like me do go to university' and that 'university is not just for young people'.
- University is seen as something adults would or could consider for the future. 6% are already considering it, 24% would consider applying in the future, and a further 55% could be encouraged to apply. Only 15% are not interested and cannot be encouraged to consider university as an option.
- Adults feel they know what HE has to offer but are less sure of how to access it and the costs involved. 58% of respondents feel very or fairly well informed about the opportunities available in HE, but adults are less confident about their knowledge of entry requirements, the costs of study and the financial support available.
- Adults feel that going to university improves employability and career prospects and aids personal development, and these are key motivators to consider applying to university.
- Adults want a different type of HE experience, preferring to study part-time, in evenings and weekends and at a university or college close to home. If this type of study experience were available, it would overcome adults' reluctance to consider HE and alleviate difficulties in balancing work and family commitments with study.
- Employer encouragement and support is also important: 56% would be willing to think about HE if they were given encouragement from their employer, and 69% of employees would do so if they were given paid time off to study.
- Despite positive attitudes to learning, a lack of interest and a perceived lack of the value in the HE experience are the main reasons why adults do not consider HE, and 15% of all responding adults do not see HE as an option for them - they are not in the least interested and cannot be encouraged to consider applying in the future.
- HE is seen as costly and concerns about the costs of study and the potential to run up debt act as a barrier to HE entry.

Forthcoming reports from the ERSC Teaching and Learning Research Programme may provide some further evidence of mature student issues.
This research will explore working class students' experiences of higher education once at university, their impact on their learner and cultural identities, and the implications of these for their progress and retention. The research will employ mixed methods across four institutions, located in three different geographical areas, comprising an elite, 'red brick' and post-1992 university and a college of Further Education, offering Foundation degrees.
The research compares the social and cultural experiences of working class students in different types of universities in order to identify any similarities and differences. This will help us to understand how they see themselves as learners and whether they see a need to operate strategically in order 'to stay in and get on'. The research will find out whether working class students feel the need to adapt and change their identities in order to survive and progress at university or whether they resist any pressures and expectations to do so. We intend to discern whether and if so how, this impacts or potentially impacts on their learning and ability to stay the course. We are also interested to learn whether these processes are gendered and 'raced'.

This study will examine the extent to which HE is conceived as 'within the bounds of the possible' for non-participants and will explore how attitudes to HE and decisions about non-participation are embedded within 'networks of intimacy' consisting of family members and close friends. It hypothesises that such networks provide a critical context within which individuals' thinking about participation is embedded. The study will identify non-participating adults at different stages in the life-course to provide 'entry points' to each network. The focus at the macro and micro levels on non-participants and on adults at various stages in the life-course make this research distinctive, as existing research has tended to focus on non-traditional participants and applicants and on adults below the age of 30.

Hockings C, Bowl M (2008) Learning and teaching for social diversity and difference
This research project will explore ways of enhancing the learning and teaching environment to improve the academic engagement and participation of a diverse range of students, particularly in relation to differences in class and academic background, age, gender and ethnicity.

The drive to widen participation in higher education in the UK is longstanding yet there is still remarkably little in the way of large-scale quantitative analysis of many aspects of this issue. This research aims to develop a theoretically based quantitative empirical analysis of the higher education experience of different students, particularly disadvantaged students, ethnic minorities, women, those entering HE without A levels and mature students. The analysis will be multi-disciplinary, building on economic, education and geographical theories of educational attainment, and will provide a life course perspective to the issue of widening access to higher education.

Overview of Research Findings

The literature into mature students' experiences of accessing into and progression through HE varies in quality and approach. Whilst there are a few longitudinal quantitative reports, most of the studies have used a qualitative approach. In several examples, case studies have been developed using ethnographical research approaches. These offer a snapshot as the numbers involved are small and there is little comparative analysis of findings. This can pose a problem as the outcomes of the work described may not always be transferable to other contexts and so the evidence has limited value for influencing practice. The limitations of the research have been ably discussed in the extensive review of widening participation research by Gorrard et al (2006) and therefore will not be expanded on here. In general the research has taken a student lifecycle approach and considered issues of decision-making pre-entry and barriers to access, progression and transition issues, first year experiences and student support and success. Other evidence considers graduate employment and employability issues. This synthesis therefore draws together some of the UK-based research findings since late 1990s in relation to evidence on the pre-entry influences and motivators on mature students' decision making, access and admissions, on-course student success and retention, employability and graduate employment.

Evidence on the pre-entry influences and motivators on mature students' decision making

Demographics

The evidence available indicates that mature students are not a homogenous group. They are linked only by their decision to participate in higher education at a stage in their life that is well beyond the full-time schooling period. Mature students differ considerably with respects to their demographic characteristics, such as class, ethnicity and gender making it difficult to generalise.

Some of the research findings identify data on mature HE students (e.g. Davies 2002; Ross et al 2002).
• The majority of mature students are middle class although the take-up of mature working class students is increasing.
• Proportionately more people from working class than middle-class origins study as adults than at the school leaving age (Egerton 2001a). Mature students tend to enter higher education with a wider range of entry qualifications than younger students, for whom A levels predominate.
• Available data on mature students enrolled on all undergraduate programmes indicate that in 2005-06 approximately 20% of full-time students were students from geographical neighbourhoods with low levels of participation (LPN) in higher education and less than 10% of part-time learners from LPN. (HESA 2008)
• A recent DIUS-sponsored survey indicated that there may be substantially more people from LPNs with the potential to become HE students (Pollard et al, 2008).
• Working-class mature students are older than middle-class mature students and are more likely to study in less prestigious institutions.
• The majority of mature learners are on part-time programmes (HESA 2008)
• Mature students over 24 are more likely to study part-time than full-time. Nearly 90 per cent of part-time undergraduate students are aged 25 or over and two thirds are 30+.
• Many part-time students already have some HE experience and are returning to study at the same level, thus they do not contribute to increasing the HE participation rate as they are not new entrants to HE.
• In general, students from all Black ethnic groups are more likely to be mature than students from other ethnic groups.
• There are slightly more male mature students than female mature students.

Some of the research available on mature students refers to those from lower socio-economic groups (e.g. Reay et al 2002, Archer 2001, Ball et al 2002, Davies 2002) and there is widespread agreement in the literature that social class is a significant factor in the learner’s decision to participate in HE (McGivney, 2001; Burke, 2002; Hayton and Paczuska, 2002; Archer, 2003). Forsyth and Furlong (2003) point out that social disadvantage affects educational achievement regardless of innate academic ability.

Research by Purcell et al (2007) into mature graduates found that mature students had a greater propensity to have come from lower socio-economic background, to have studied at new universities or HE colleges (often within commuting distance of their homes because of other commitments) rather than older universities, and to have ‘non-standard’ entry qualifications. Although ‘young mature’ graduates (between 21-24 years on entry) were
very close in social class profile to the 'young' graduates (those entering HE straight from school), only 40 per cent of those who graduated when they were aged 30 or over came from a professional or managerial family of origin, compared with over 60 per cent for the younger categories of graduates. Those at the older end of the student population frequently embarked on degree courses for intrinsic reasons, seeing the opportunity to study as an end in itself rather than as a career investment. On the other hand the young mature students entering HE after a period of employment more often took an instrumental approach, with a clear view of the opportunities to which a degree gave access.

Influencers and motivators
With respect to mature students, Osborne et al (2004) suggest there are six categories of applicants to HE:

- 'delayed traditional students': these have chosen to take time out from their education but re-enter through a traditional route;
- 'late starters' who have undergone a life-transforming event and require a new start; see also Lawton (2005);
- 'single parents';
- 'careeerists' - people currently in employment;
- 'escapees' who are employed but want a different career pathway; and
- 'personal growers' - those wanting to pursue education for its own sake.

There is some evidence of cultural and social homogeneity across these mature learner groups; for example, 'single parents' may also be 'escapees' as their social circumstances change; women returners may be 'late starters' but also 'personal growers'. Other common issues relate to the role dependents play in their lives, their employment status, marital circumstances, family support and traditions and educational experiences. Of particular relevance are the motivations towards accessing HE and the influences on their decision making, and these issues have been explored in the research using sociological theoretical approaches.

Fuller and Paton (2007) note that social and personal conditions can act as either a catalyst or an inhibitor with respect to the decision to apply to HE. Inhibitors, whether personal or structural, are frequently referred to as 'barriers to access'. They suggest a three-way classification of barriers: 'dispositional' - that is relating to individual motivation and attitudes to learning; 'situational' such as costs, time, geographical accessibility of the provision, and factors which are relevant to an individual's circumstances; and 'institutional' such as the extent to which the institution is prepared to be flexible with regard to mode of attendance, time-tabling, admissions procedures and requirements. These barriers are conceived in relation to constraints, material, practical and psychological which are culturally and socially bound and have been
described as multi-dimensional and complex (see e.g. Ball et al 2002; 2002a; Reay et al 2005; Davies et al 2002).

Fuller and Paton (2007) note that the concept of barriers carries within it both an explanation for participation or non-participation and also a solution in that removing the barriers will increase opportunities for participation. They note that decisions about non-participation or participation are not just about overcoming so called barriers to participation but are wrapped up in complex educational decision-making across the life course and in its socio-historical context.

The reasons why people make choices not to participate may have relevance for future policy towards encouraging mature learners to participate. Osborne et al (2004) indicate that a highly motivated group of potential learners exists but may approach the prospect of HE with trepidation and uncertainty. Research by Hayton and Paczuska (2002), Ball et al (2002), Archer et al (2003) and Bowl (2001) has raised issues about the long-term and persistent role of structural (race, gender and class) and cultural influences on HE participation decisions (see also Reay et al (2005); Brine, Waller (2004); Britton, Baxter (1999); Burke, Penny (2004); Wooding, Burke (2007); Tett (2000)).

Forthcoming work by Fuller et al (2008 forthcoming) will look in more detail at the extent to which HE is conceived as ‘within the bounds of the possible’ for non-participants and will explore how attitudes to HE and decisions about non-participation are embedded within ‘networks of intimacy’ consisting of family members and close friends. This builds on earlier work by Davies et al (2002) which noted that, although mature learners recognise the private return from HE will be high, at a personal level concepts of risk and fragility are more pertinent to the decision-making process. These risks are bound up with notions of self-identity both within existing community and in relation to loss of identity if they choose to enter HE (Tett 2004). Parental influence on decision making is strong, and arises from parents' attitudes to education and their own levels of achievement (Davies et al. 2002). The influence of peers is reflected in Gull's (2000) work which suggests that a friend or acquaintance from within their community who participates in HE can be influential (Gull, 2000). Changing family or lifestyle circumstances may be the trigger to participation, such as acquiring a new partner or having children. However, for some mature students, there is a fear of losing their identity as they feel that HE may require them to adopt a persona that is not authentic to them (Reay, 2003; Reay et al, 2005).

Recent work by Lawton (2005) with mature working class females indicated that a significant life event may raise aspirations to participate in HE, whilst expressions of doing something for myself and for getting a job and a successful career are commonly recognised in the literature. Lawton makes a distinction between male and female participation, a point Marks (2000) has addressed in considering why low participation
amongst males may be caught up within social and cultural understandings of masculinity (Marks et al 2003). Woodin and Burke (2007) noted that some working class men struggle with different perceptions about being a university student. The men expressed frustration with the view that as a mature student they do not fit into a mould of a ‘traditional’ younger student whilst they also had to deal with class-based conceptions of masculinity, bound up with issues of paid employment and the acquisition of material status symbols and both of these issues can inhibit their decisions to enter HE.

Fear of academic failure may be a legitimate barrier for some learners and is particularly pertinent for some working class mature students whose self-confidence has been damaged by past experience of academic/schooling failure. Thorpe et al (2007) in a small study point out that sometimes self-perception may provide a distorted view of capability.

Whilst socio-psychological issues may inhibit participation there are other material and practical concerns and constraints that many mature learners have to face (Reay et al 2005). Davies et al (2002) noted five motivating factors for becoming a mature student: an interest in the subject to be studied; the chance to enhance career prospects; a wish to improve existing qualifications; a desire to change the direction of their life; and the fact that they had always wanted to study but never had the opportunity. In other words, personal advancement was a crucial motivator (see also Woodley and Brennan 2000). Kay and Sundaraj (2004) and Warmington (2003) identified that Access to HE students recognised the need for higher level qualifications in order to be successful in life. Purcell et al (2007) noted that graduates who completed their course in their late 20s to 40s were most likely to have taken their courses with a clear intention of enhancing their employment opportunities. The factors underlying decisions to enter HE often involved a combination of personal and career reasons.

Connor et al (1999) researched decisions to participate in HE and noted some general issues for full time working class students. The main motivating factors included emphasis on the expected beneficial outcomes of HE, such as a belief that a higher qualification will bring improved job and career prospects and also improved earnings and job security. The main reasons why people from lower social class groups who held HE entry qualifications had decided against going into HE were twofold: they either wanted to start employment, earn money and be independent at an earlier age or they were worried about the cost of studying. Additional concerns were about being able to cope with academic pressures and workload, gaining the entry qualifications, the application process itself, and personal issues such as childcare. Many respondents felt that there was a need for more relevant and timely information concerning HE, particularly with respect to student finances.

Osborne et al (2001, 2004) also reported that cost of studying, the need
to work to earn a living, responsibilities of current job, domestic/family responsibilities, lack of childcare, and lack of confidence were important issues for mature learners. As the majority of mature students are part-timers it is worth noting that Connor et al (2001) reported that there were different motivations and different issues to contend with for part-time learners. The priority influencers here were: better employment and career prospects; academic achievement; economic/financial reasons. Although respondents recognised that being employed and studying would bring added stress, they thought it would be worthwhile in the end. However, for some, their family support was limited compared with younger learners and a financial contribution from their own employment and/or savings was be needed to finance their study. Although finance was a problem for some part-time students, on the whole they had fewer financial problems than full-time students. Part-timers thought they lacked knowledge about financial support from the HEIs.

Findings on the influence of financial issues as inhibitors to participation for mature students are mixed. Fear of debt is an important issue with concerns expressed about the effects of HE participation on a learner's family resources (Bowl 2003). There was a significant fall in mature learner participation following the introduction of tuition fees and, although levels have now risen, nevertheless the impact of higher levels of fee is important. For part-timers, the lack of access to student loans may affect some students.

Collier et al (2003) found that competing responsibilities and a preference for earning money were key reasons for non-participation among potential applicants and Ulrich (2004) similarly found that potential entrants to higher education perceived time or financial commitment to be the main barriers to their participation. Additional factors were identified by Schuller et al (1997) in the form of employer support (financial or time off) for those undertaking study whilst in employment.

Access and admissions
The application and admission of mature students to HE can be supported by the approach institutions take towards welcoming their admission, the programme choices available, the admissions criteria and the information advice and guidance students receive about the HEI and the course. Equally pre-entry study preparation and academic qualifications can support effective transition into HE. However, as well as the personal and social issues that influence mature student decisions about participating, there are some other significant external factors that influence learner decision making which are more pertinent to mature learners than to younger learners.

Institution and course choice
Davies et al (2002) highlighted the factors that influenced choice of particular institutions and identified the following as important to mature students:
• An accessible institution in terms of geographical location was a prime factor. For those who had constraints on their mobility, relatively small additional distances were sometimes crucial and may be issues for students in rural and coastal areas (UCAS 2002).

• The structure of courses was identified by 66% of women and 73% of men as important: course availability, location, course structures and reputation were important in choosing where to apply.

• Institutional factors e.g. the availability of specialised vocational courses targeted at specific groups or the formal approval by a professional body.

• Part-time students in particular ranked 'structure of the course' and 'APEL arrangements' as important in the choice of HEIs.

• Behaviour and practice in relation to mature students was more important for most than attitudes and, in particular, potential entrants were concerned about the clarity and transparency of admissions procedures.

The level of detail available about a course was also relevant. Mature students' concerns about accessibility and flexibility encompassed a wider range of issues than usually arise, particularly around timetabling, choice of study modes and the provision of information. Child care support, for example, meant more than the provision of on-site nurseries, and subsidised care was appreciated.

The research identified that information per se was often seen as less of a problem than the timing of information. Potential entrants wanted to have all the information (for example about timetables) before they made their final decision.

Research indicates that some mature students choose HEIs where they feel they are likely to fit in. Leathwood and O’Connell (2003) and Read et al (2003) found that the non-traditional students in their research had chosen institutions where they felt they would not be different. For the mature students this was because they were fearful of being socially and academically inadequate compared to younger students. In choosing post-1992 institutions the perception was that the HEI would be friendly, less formal and multicultural. This may also apply to some ethnic minority students who wish to avoid cultural isolation (see also Murphy 2000).

Research by Reay et al (2001) and Archer (2001) indicated that students strive to achieve a sense of belonging even in post-1992 HEIs and that students have a sense of not ‘fitting in’. The modular system and lack of time for social engagement were noted as relevant and discussed below in relation to retention. Mature students make particular subject choices, which are different to those of younger students. Business and Management, subjects allied to Medicine, Performing Arts, Mathematics
and IT are all more popular with mature students than with younger students. Social Studies are popular in both categories, mature and non-mature (Ross et al 2002, pp 40-41).

Decisions about institutions and courses may be made in relation to the individual's personal circumstances. For example, Egerton (2001a, 2001b) noted that most part-time students pay their own fees and that is indicative of individual demand for part-time participation (only a minority have their fees paid by an employer) whilst 83% of part-time students are in work 'before, during and after their studies' and 70% are in full time employment (Brennan et al 1999).

**Information, Advice and Guidance**

Information on institution and course is crucial, with individualised advice and guidance required. Connor et al (1999), in considering access to IAG, noted that although mature students were more likely to have experience of visits from university representatives (particularly when on a focused Access to HE programme), overall they use a narrower range of sources than younger students. In particular they are less likely than school leavers to use guides or careers fairs but equally likely to use the internet or websites to access information. Research and teaching quality assessments were used widely by applicants from higher social classes. Mature students were found to place more emphasis on reputation and quality, location and distance from home. Whittaker et al (2004) identified the need for accessible and clear advice and guidance for adults that recognised their specific needs, particularly amongst groups with a tradition of non-participation.

The ways in which courses are advertised, the clarity of their procedures and the welcome they give to mature students are important in promoting mature student access. The Schwartz Report into Fair Admissions (Schwartz 2004) made it clear that HEIs need to give recognition to mature students in their admissions information. Support for completing UCAS applications was seen as a crucial part of the procedure but acknowledgement was made to the fact that the majority of mature students required part-time provision and advice and support for the application was often made by individuals alone and direct to the HEIs. It was seen as important that advice was therefore accessible to this group of students. Equally the report recommended that all applicants were treated individually.

Murphy (2000) identified that admission criteria in themselves may be confusing. From research in his Irish institution, even successful applicants were unsure about why they had been accepted compared with those who had been unsuccessful, indicating a lack of standardisation or transparency in the ways in which the university assesses students' ability to cope in an academic environment. Students thought the admissions process appeared arbitrary and Murphy suggested that there may be issues such as internal quotas for
recruitment resulting in further filtering of applicants, the criteria for which students do not know. Weko (2004) has suggested that elite practices in some HEIs restrict access to under-represented groups such as mature students in order to maintain high retention rates.

As noted earlier, the reasons why learners choose to enter HE affect the choice of programme to which mature learners apply e.g. better future employment (Collier et al 2002; Kay and Sundaraj 2004). The financial support available may limit choices too (Weko 2004). This may be pertinent to those wishing for part-time study as most part-time students pay their own fees as noted earlier.

Flexibility of programme provision is also an important factor. The numbers progressing to Foundation Degrees show the popularity of the part-time routes for mature learners particularly if they are supported by employers (Doyle and O'Doherty 2006; Bainbridge 2005; HEFCE 2008).

**Admission Criteria**

An important factor affecting applicants is whether or not an individual meets the specified entry criteria. Ross et al (2002) provided a quantitative analysis of the potential for expanding HE participation by mature people by examining trends in participation and attainment and the propensity of different groups to enter HE. For mature students entering degree courses, the four major qualifications for entry are Access routes, BTEC, A-levels and "no entry qualifications". They are all of similar importance, and between them account for three-quarters of all students. For mature HND students (far fewer in number), over one third arrive with no formal qualifications, and 'other' qualifications and BTEC are the other two major types of qualification used for entry. These three account for over 70% of all mature HND students.

Schwartz (2004) identified that 71% of mature entrants were admitted on the basis of non-A level qualifications (such as Access and Vocational Qualifications) and other criteria such as Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), but these entrants were concentrated in some courses (such as nursing) or in some universities and colleges (typically in post-1992 institutions and colleges of higher education). The report suggested students should be admitted on their ability to complete the course as judged by their achievements and their potential. However, barriers to entry existed because of a possible curriculum mismatch between HE courses and entry via vocational and Access qualifications; lack of appropriate pre-entry knowledge of the subject discipline; lack of familiarity of admissions staff with some qualifications.

Schwartz (2004) suggested that, in some cases, the rationale for admissions criteria might be to make the course unattractive to mature learners and in effect exclude them. This view was endorsed by Osborne et al (2004) who suggested that although mature students are an important part of HE enrolments, this varies across HEIs and the priority
may only apply if they can help meet enrolment targets.

**Academic preparation**

Access to Higher Education programmes and some foundation year courses have been specifically designed for mature student preparation to HE study. A recent HEFCE (2007) analysis of Access to HE student progression identified that this route is a fairly successful pathway for learners, particularly for women and ethnic minorities. Wray (2000) and Archer (2001, 2001a) had similarly supported these programmes as important not only for short-cutting longer learning pathways but also for preparing students for HE study. This may be particularly the case where partnership developments through Aimhigher and LLNs are beginning to clarify progression opportunities between FECs and HEIs (Schwartz 2004).

Recent work by Moran (2008) on entry to teacher training has identified the importance of recognising not only prior education but also the skills, knowledge and experiences gained within and beyond education that could be beneficial for those entering education. Moran suggests it is important to recognise these as well as provide flexible learning opportunities to ensure that a wider group is able to access teacher education.

Schwartz (2004) noted the importance of bridging programmes to help with learner transition into HE. Buckler et al (2006) endorse this by providing an overview of the effectiveness of a pre-entry study skills programme which capitalises on pre-existing skills as well as enhancing skills such as ICT that are required for success in HE. Some mature learners are admitted without formal qualifications (Ross et al 2002) and Haskins and Brown (2002) argue that formal qualifications such as Access certificates do not guarantee that mature students holding these qualifications will be more successful than those with no qualifications. Indeed, the important element is the assessment of learners' ability to be successful and adults' experience and motivation to succeed may be as important as their qualifications.

The recognition of mature learners' life and work experience could be recognised to give them entry and/or advanced standing onto HE programmes. Approaches to the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) or Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) will be discussed in detail elsewhere but in this context it is worth noting work by Pokorny et al (2001), for example, in commenting on the difficulties to be addressed in using APEL effectively to support mature learner progress into HE. Weko (2004) noted in a paper comparing the UK with the US model of HE that the use of credit and part-time provision could be beneficial in supporting mature learner access to HE.

**Supporting mature student success in HE**

Although mature student experiences of and success in HE may differ
from those of younger students, there appears to be little research evidence specifically addressing this issue. In particular, there is a dearth of evidence in relation to curriculum structure and/or pedagogical approaches that meet older learners' needs and support student success and degree attainment. While it is recognised that personal tutoring and access to teaching staff, as well as a flexible programme structures, may be pertinent, the detailed research evidence is lacking, a point which may have some relevance when considering any expansion of participation by work-based mature learners, in order to ensure appropriate support and pedagogical practice is developed. Research evidence relating to student retention and success are discussed elsewhere in detail and will not be repeated here. Rather, this section provides an overview of some of the specific factors highlighted in the research evidence on supporting mature student success in HE.

Rates of retention and withdrawal
In general mature students perform at least as well as younger students. Males have lower retention rates than females, but older men withdraw for finance or work-related issues whereas older women withdraw for family reasons.

A recent Committee of Public Accounts Report (CPA 2008) into retention rates in higher education noted that around 28,000 full-time and 87,000 part-time students who started first-degree courses in 2004-05 were no longer in higher education a year later. Of the part-time first-degree students who started courses in 2001-02, only 46.9% had graduated after six years and 44.5% had left higher education without completing a qualification. By contrast, 76.8% of the full-time students starting in 2002-03 achieved a qualification and only 15.2% left without a qualification. Around 8% of both full and part-time students were still studying.

The CPA report noted some difficulties in interpreting data on part-time students, for example where their study is intentionally intermittent. It is important to correlate the data with the fact that the majority of part-time learners are mature learners which, in itself, may have implications for the experience of students on these programmes and their retention rates. However, there is no longitudinal research which attempts to draw out these experiences.

Recognising that some part-time programmes are very long-term and that the experiences of the participants on these programmes will differ over time, Piette (2002) and Mercer and Saunders (2004) point out the personal growth and development that students go through on these programmes. They also indicate a need for flexible provision and flexibility in how students access their learning, and highlight the importance of considering the changing needs of students throughout the course and the social dimension of the learning experience. Mercer and Saunders (2004) note the importance of recognising the changing levels of self-confidence and belief across the life-time of a course. Knight et al
(2006) also note these changes amongst student on an Early Years Foundation Degree and point out that, even when students make a decision to withdraw from their studies, their learning still has a positive effect on them and their employment practices, and, in this respect, withdrawal should not simply be seen in relation to poor retention rates.

The Committee of Public Accounts report (2008) and National Audit Office report (2007) also noted that some students register with a university for a higher education course that is taught in a local further education college under a franchise agreement; analysis by the National Audit Office of the 2004-05 entrants found that students studying part-time under these arrangements have a higher chance of continuing than if they had studied in a university. This raises questions about the context and location, as well as delivery, of HE programmes to mature students.

Powdthavee and Vignoles (2007) identify that, if allowances are made for personal characteristics, prior qualifications, gender and ethnicity, mature students in newer universities are more likely to complete higher education programmes than younger learners. They found that students taking sandwich courses and part-time students are less likely to drop out compared to full-time students, although the degree classification achieved by the part-timers may be lower. Experiences do vary across the sector, however. A study by Leathwood and O’Connell (2003) identifies that, for many students, studying is a struggle and is not helped by institutional deficit perspectives on mature students who are regarded as non-traditional or different. They note that, for some students, a fragmented HE experience fits in with their particular needs.

**Factors contributing to early withdrawal**

On-course student success is influenced by a range of factors including motivation for study, student support within and beyond the institution, pre-entry preparation and curriculum congruence as discussed earlier. Issues of student identity, self confidence and the risks taken in becoming a mature student are identified in an extensive review of retention by Harvey et al (2006) and will not be reiterated further here.

Mature students are not a homogenous group and both students and their teachers may have preconceived ideas of what the HE experience may be like (Merrill 2000). After an initial unsettled period, HE mature students can become ‘institutionalised’ and enjoy their learning, becoming as capable as other younger students. Nevertheless, teaching approaches and institutional structures are more likely to be geared towards younger learners and this could be considered further by some HEIs.

Baxter and Hatt (1999) identified that in fact mature students could be differentiated according to age as age appears to correlate with different levels of success. They differentiate between three age bands of
students - standard (below 21 years), younger matures (21-24yrs), and older matures (25 and over) and identified that some younger matures were more likely to experience difficulties. Older matures were more likely to have uninterrupted progression through from the first year into the second year, despite a longer period time out of education compared to the younger mature group. In general the younger mature learners were more at risk of leaving the course than older mature students. Baxter and Hatt also noted that nearly half of the younger mature students entered through the clearing process although, overall, entry qualifications had no bearing on retention rates. Simonite (1997, 2003) notes the experience of mature learners on modularised programmes and identified better progression through the first and second years in comparison with younger learners. Transition within HE is also explored by Goddard and Penketh (2007) who suggest that the complexities around mature learner study and their negotiation through HE should be recognised in the structure and design of programmes.

Student withdrawal from HE programmes may be linked to a student's intrinsic motivation on entering HE. Charlton et al (2006) have considered some of the demographic and psychological factors to explain first year withdrawal and identified that pre-entry student counselling on motivations to enter HE could support student retention. As Baxter and Hatt (1999) identified, for some students individual interviews pre-entry may be relevant to identify needs and provide appropriate advice.

The provision of learning support is also an issue for consideration, and May et al (2001) have presented a paper considering the importance of student and lecturer interaction and how improved communication can enhance the learners' feelings of being valued and supported. Yorke and Longden (2008) noted how, in general, older learners are more critical of the HE experience when they have withdrawn than younger students and that this may be related to learner support issues.

Social and personal issues
Archer et al (2003) notes that friendships are important in supporting student retention. Mature students who are more likely than school leavers to live at home and to have less time for social integration may be more likely to leave the course if difficulties occur (Christie et al 2005). Social support in the first year is seen as very important (Wilcox et al 2005), although recent research by Yorke and Longden (2008) noted that mature learners are less likely than younger learners to withdraw because of problems of social integration.

Thomas et al (2002) and Dodgson and Bolam (2002) recognised the importance of student support services in understanding these issues. They noted the need to be proactive to prevent 'problems' occurring and recognised that 'drop-out' for these groups occurs for different reasons from those that arise for younger students (Ozga and Sukhnandan 1998).
Yorke and Longden (2007; 2008) noted that financial concerns were particularly relevant to mature students’ decision to withdraw, although this applied less strongly in the case of part-time students. The review on widening participation research indicated that the evidence on the role that financial difficulties and debt play in learner participation and retention is unresolved with contrary evidence indicated. More important may be the role financial problems can play when in connection to other factors for mature learners (Gorrard et al 2006)

Other issues that affect mature learners relate to concerns about family commitments and the ‘pull and push’ influence it exerts. Bainbridge (2005) suggests that a part-time Foundation Degree attracting mature learners provides a location and course structure that enables women to maintain the role of carer while also reducing the risks in terms of cost, time and travel. A report by Walkup (2006) argues that the family responsibilities of mothers and the impact of this role on studying are not recognised within the HE sector. Cappleman-Morgan (2005) makes the point that, regardless of gender, students who are carers are often time-starved and stressed and, consequently, approach both learning and their caring roles in an instrumental way. Once again this is unlikely to be considered by HEIs. Older students find that the needs of dependents compete with the demands to study and these can be strong influencers on decisions to withdraw. Yorke and Longden 2008 note the influence of social isolation on mature learners’ perspectives on HE. Some students feel lost within the HE culture and possibly the nature of learning e.g. modular and part-time provision may act as barrier to feeling part of an HEI. Thomas (2002) refers to the social habitus of the institution as affecting the experience of different student groups.

Success or failure?
Quinn et al (2005) noted that withdrawal from HE courses may not necessarily indicate failure even though, in statistical terms, this is how withdrawal is presented. As Knight et al (2006) commented, a mature learner withdrawing from a programme will still take increased knowledge and learning with them back into their working life. This view is endorsed by Pollard et al (2004) in a large study of the first fee-paying cohort of students on considerations influencing their career choices. The students in this study who left their courses early were in a minority, came from diverse backgrounds and left for different reasons. Mature leavers recognised that their personal circumstances often limited their choices and expressed that they had an ‘obstacle course’ to overcome to get into and through HE. The report noted few leavers sought advice about their decision to leave, or about their subsequent choices. Nevertheless many returned to higher education, often after a period of employment or while continuing employment, and most valued their time in HE as it helped them to make better future choices and increased their self-confidence. However, the experience came at a financial cost and, for some students, this outweighed any potential benefits.
The research recommended that good practice in retaining and advising potential early leavers should be disseminated widely. It should focus on the identification of those most at risk of leaving, encouraging them to seek advice early, helping those who wish to remain to do so, or to transfer them to a more suitable course/institution (or to manage their exit from HE). There is little research which explores the role of on-course advice and guidance in supporting learner retention.

**Employability and Graduate Employment**

There are some interesting reports into graduate employment outcomes that highlight issues for mature students. For example, Egerton and Bynner, (2000); Egerton, (2001a/b); Blasko, (2002); Brennan and Shah, (2003); Egerton and Parry, (2001) have all presented evidence on the difficulties mature students experience in the graduate employment market. This section summarises some of these findings.

A study comparing the occupational attainment of mature graduates from working class origins with those from middle class origins by Egerton (2001) noted that:

- working-class mature graduates do less well in the labour market than middle-class mature graduates;
- Mature graduates have faster promotion rates than early graduates, largely making up for initial labour market disadvantages;
- Possession of a higher degree removes employment disadvantages for mature graduates;
- Notwithstanding continuing disadvantages compared with middle-class graduates, mature study appears to support inter-generational social mobility for manual class women and men;
- The rates of return for female graduates are higher than for males.

They concluded that, in order to obtain a positive return from their investment, the graduates would need to achieve a rate of return that exceeds the interest that could have derived from investing the money elsewhere. Hence, on the basis of these results, the average male mature graduate would have fared better financially had they not entered HE but instead invested their money in a building society that paid interest of more than 1.5%.

In a large report for HEFCE by Blasko et al (2002) analysing the factors determining graduate employability, the findings supported previous studies indicating that success in the labour market for graduates is, to some extent, associated with the background characteristics of graduates. Socio-economic background, ethnicity and age all have indirect effects upon employment through their association with factors such as institutional type, subject of study, entry qualifications and degree classification. They also appear to have direct effects as, even when the influence of the above factors are controlled for, graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds, ethnic minorities and older
graduates do less well in the labour market than their peers (although better than their peers who did not go into higher education).

A further report by Brennan and Shah (2003) reiterated the earlier studies with an analysis of the factors associated with successful employment outcomes among graduates, with particular attention to the interaction between social factors (social class, ethnicity and age) and educational factors (subject studied, institution attended, entry qualifications and class of degree) and looked at ways in which higher education institutions might be able to help students from disadvantaged backgrounds to improve their employment prospects after graduation. Amongst mature graduates, those over 24 years of age experienced greater disadvantages in the labour market than their counterparts who entered after leaving school or who were between 21 and 24 at entry to higher education. In fact, those who entered higher education between the ages of 21 and 24 appeared to experience certain labour market advantages. They were more likely to be in graduate level jobs and to be more satisfied with their jobs than younger graduates.

For the older mature graduates, work experience during higher education, term-time working, involvement in extra-curricular activities (which was at a much lower level than other groups) and overseas experience (which they were less likely to have access to) all seemed to have no association with successful employment outcomes. Timing of the job search also did not appear to have an impact on the employment prospects for this group of graduates. However, the technique of contacting employers without knowing about a vacancy seemed to be associated with employment success.

Brennan and Shah's findings related to the differentiation between young matures and older matures are upheld in a recent detailed study by Purcell et al (2007) which recorded the outcomes of a qualitative and quantitative study of a class of 1995 graduates which explored early career development and employment outcomes according to age at graduation. The study found that older mature graduates were less favoured in employment, earnings growth and job satisfaction. This research found considerable diversity among all age groups, and that negative outcomes were far from inevitable, but that many older graduates appear to have experienced greater challenges than younger ones. The distinction drawn between 'young mature' and 'older mature' graduates enabled clarification of the extent to which it was those who graduated over the age of 30 who were most likely to experience difficulty in accessing appropriate employment. Although this might have been attributable to the type of work older mature graduates obtained, their social background and lower entry qualifications, the authors concluded that their detailed analysis led to them to believe the main factor was the age of the graduates.

In recent years, the graduate premium has been discussed in terms other
than employment such as benefits for family and an individual's active participation in society as a citizen (see e.g. HEFCE 2003). A recent study reviewing and comparing the graduate experiences of mature learners from Birkbeck University and the Open University – both institutions that admit a predominantly part-time mature student body – noted other benefits such as improvement in skills to enhance employability (Jamieson, Feinstein, Woodley 2007). Most graduates appeared to have the same employment status, and to be in the same type of work, as when they began studying but one third felt they had been helped in their current job and/or it had become more satisfying. Over a half said that their career opportunities had improved, and that they expected future benefits including a higher income. They also noted additional personal and educational benefits such as the positive impact on family and friends, particularly being able to help children with their education, improved self-confidence and increased happiness.

It should be noted that research by Harris in a DFEE report (2001) identified mature students and students from lower socio-economic groups as the least likely groups to use the careers service, and, if they did, it was often too late to give them the maximum benefit. Thus there may be lessons to learn for mature undergraduates in relation to skills development and their access to careers advice and guidance.

Policy Implications

Institutional
As Aimhigher and WP outreach activity remains relevant to 'younger' mature learners (between 21 and 30 years) who have different experiences and outcomes from HE, there should be a clear institutional strategy aimed at these learners.

There should be clarity about the recruitment of part-time learners, using institutional data profiling these students. A greater understanding of the variety of part-time learners, the experiences they have of admissions practices, the provision they access, and the value of their participation within the HE institution needs developing.

A strategy towards developing flexible provision that meets the needs of part-time employed mature students should be developed and become part of an institution's marketing strategy.

Development of institutional strategies towards providing specific transition and induction support, access to internal advice, guidance, learning support, and personal/tutorial support, all of which need to be made clear to mature learners pre-application.

Development of admissions criteria that are realistic and outline the variety of options available to mature learners. The use of profiles to
support part-time learners is important when applications are made directly to HEIs.

Consideration of developing bespoke information for mature students pre- and post-application which reflects institutional and course level culture and service provision for mature students particularly for those who have an external caring role.

Internal teaching, learning and assessment strategies that reflect the value the institution places on the life and employment experiences of mature students and reflects the need for flexibility in supporting learner success.

Partnership working with FECs and Sector Skills Councils is highly relevant in accessing a wider group of mature learners who are employed.

**HE Sector**
Development of clear and accessible data which provides a realistic picture of mature student enrolment and experiences within the HE sector, particularly with regard to part-time higher education.

Further research evidence of mature students’ experience within HE with particular reference to learning outcomes, personal and knowledge development and knowledge transfer of those undertaking part-time study over an extended period whilst still in employment and/or in a caring role.

A clear strategy towards mature students that recognises that access into and experience of HE differs from that of younger learners and that mature learners are not a homogenous group. This may include further development of a credit accumulation and transfer systems and a better national approach to the use of APL and APEL that benefits both the learner and the HEI.

A review of the financial support for part-time learners with particular reference to the availability of student loans.

Raise awareness of HEI careers guidance services and employability strategies to support better mature graduate outcomes.
Implications for Stakeholder Groups

Local Partnerships
Development of progression agreements into and through part-time HE from FECs into local HE provision which recognises mature learner needs.

Better information, advice and guidance targeted at mature learners including, where possible, signposts to specific teams or individuals who can provide more details of courses, modules and timetables.

Better financial advice aimed at mature learners including individual and local HE financial support available.

Improved approach to development of the employability skills of mature students prior to HE with the aim of further development in HE.

Students
Take up invites to university visits/open days, summer schools and study skills workshops, especially if applying to HE with no prior qualifications.

Access websites and local careers services to obtain a full picture of the options available.

Use on-course Personal Development Portfolio to support internal progression, identification of points of difficulty and identification of career aims.

Use learner support and guidance services available when on-course.

College staff
Work in partnership with HEIs to support the development of independent learning skills of mature learners and ensure HE tutors have clear understanding of the prior learning experiences of students.

Develop relationships with HE admission tutors to develop local progression agreements, to ensure admissions criteria are clear and transparent for mature students and to support applications to specific courses.

Encourage mature students to consider HEIs that meet individual needs and challenge students to reach their full potential.

Careers advisors
Targeted careers advice for mature learners is crucial both pre-entry and on-course.

Information on part-time provision and the realities of this type of study needs consideration at an individual level.
HE admissions staff
Ensure a welcoming atmosphere within admissions marketing materials and set admission criteria which are realistic for mature learners.

Consider methods for drawing out intrinsic motivations for success in HE at the admissions stage, including the use of supportive interviews for mature students.

Use of internal data which provides a realistic picture of part-time and mature learners’ experience on-course.

Provide opportunity for individual advice on admissions and post-application feedback to ensure admission processes are clear and fair.

HE teaching staff
Ensure that programme validation and quality reviews recognise the experiences of mature students on programme and review curriculum content and teaching and assessment practices in light of these findings.

Ensure teaching practices draw on the tacit knowledge and experience of mature students to reflect the value that the institution places on their contribution.

Consider ways to ensure flexibility within the structure of programmes to achieve learning outcomes so that mature students can succeed even in the face of external stress factors.

Ensure the programme timetable means provision is accessible by mature students on-course and that alternate options are available.

Practical Applications

Many of the practical applications available have an aim to support retention in HE and are covered elsewhere in more detail. A reasonable summary of the types of approaches HE providers are taking in support of mature students can be found in the following:


2. Action on Access has a series of publications with case studies about access and progression for widening participation target groups entitled ‘Making a Difference: the impact of Aimhigher’. There are a couple of publications reviewing activities with communities and outreach
with a focus on adult learners and also for specific target groups. These booklets can be accessed at http://www.actiononaccess.org/index.php?p=2_5_4_3_1_1

3. Foundation Degree Forward shares examples of good practice through its website. Although not specifically focused on mature students some of the good practice they highlight in designing FDs recognises the specific needs of mature, work-based learners. http://www.fdf.ac.uk/home/information_for_universities_and_colleges/case_studies/, its journal forward and other publications and briefings http://www.fdf.ac.uk/home/information_for_universities_and_colleges/fdf_publications/ http://www.fdf.ac.uk/home/information_for_universities_and_colleges/key_documents_for_providers/

4. The Higher Education Academy subject centres have occasionally funded small projects focused on mature learners: an example is noted below, but further activity related to particular subject disciplines may be found on individual subject centre websites accessed via http://www.heacademy.ac.uk

An Escalate project which aimed to compare, refine and disseminate work developed with HE and FEC partners. The project described an induction programme aimed at adult learners, mostly working part-time alongside their employment, for whom HE study is a daunting prospect even though they are experienced and effective professionals.
Report available at: http://escalate.ac.uk/1125

Literature Reviews


This literature review was undertaken by the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning at Glasgow Caledonian University on behalf of the Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department (ETLLD) of the Scottish Executive. The ETLLD requested the review to inform work currently underway in the Department which is aimed at improving the quality and consistency of information, advice and guidance to adult learners.

The overall aim of the review was to summarise the findings from research and development work in relation to the needs of adult learners
in Scotland who are looking for information, advice and guidance on learning, and the extent to which they perceive current IAG services as meeting their needs.

The research objectives were to address the following questions:

- What do potential adult learners want to know when seeking IAG on learning?
- Where would learners turn for IAG?
- Are there patterns discernible as to who needs what information, and who goes where for information, for example by socio-economic status, gender or age?
- What would the implications be of any emerging patterns in terms of IAG provision?
- What are the findings from the learners' point of view from evaluations/reviews/market research on such things as; success of marketing awareness; relevance of IAG provision; whether or not IAG was acted on; success of sign posting to other sources of help?

The review recommends further research to:

- assess the success of IAG agencies in reaching nonparticipants in education and training and to consider learner perceptions of the services;
- ascertain the measures required to strengthen IAG work with nonparticipants and the measures required to strengthen informal sources of IAG; and
- review how learners and potential learners, particularly those from traditional non-participant groups, obtain information about financial and funding issues, and how this provision could be improved.

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Further Reading

This section provides a brief introduction to some organisations with an interest in adult learner progression into Higher Education:

QAA are the validating agency for access to higher education programmes and provide statistical information on Access courses, students and their progression into and through HE. A full description of the framework for the national recognition of Access courses is provided in The QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher Education in England Wales and Northern Ireland.
http://www.qaa.ac.uk/access/full.asp

NIACE seeks to represent the interests of the UK's adult learners locally, nationally and internationally. Part of the Institute's advocacy work involves responses to documents and papers issued by other organisations, calls for evidence by various committees, commissions and enquiries and these can be accessed at:

Lifelong Learning UK are the independent employer-led sector skills council responsible for the professional development of staff working in the UK lifelong learning sector.
http://www.lifelonglearninguk.org/

Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning's (CRLL)
http://crll.gcal.ac.uk/index.htm
CRLL engages in a range of research and related activities to inform policy and provision in the field of lifelong learning in the post-compulsory sector in Scotland and beyond. The Centre provides an opportunity for informed debate in key areas through Scottish Forum for Lifelong Learning, seminars and a biennial international conference. CRLL is a joint initiative between Glasgow Caledonian University and the University of Stirling. Universities Association For Lifelong Learning (UALL) is the professional association for the lifelong learning community within higher education. UALL plays a leading role in national and international policy formulation, advocacy, research and practice in lifelong learning and continuing education. http://www.uall.ac.uk/page.aspx?tabid=7