

# Does Age Matter in Higher Education? Investigating Mature Undergraduate Students' Experiences

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## Abstract

Going to university is a big undertaking for anyone. Undergraduates in the UK generally commit three years of their life to study and generate over £30,000 of debt from student loans. However, the risks may be higher for students who are aged over 21. Personal responsibilities and the gap in their experience of education can make studying harder, as mature students drop out at twice the rate of traditional-aged students (HESA, 2012, 2016), on average. Consequently, examining the factors that disrupt mature students' studies has been a focus of a range of research (Bamber & Tett, 2000; Bowl, 2003; Hinton-Smith, 2012) in a context where Widening Participation policies have moved away from supporting mature students.

This research considers whether mature students' ages affect their experiences on a full-time undergraduate degree, during the first-two years. Yearly survey data, longitudinal interview and diary data was collected from a single cohort of students who started their undergraduate degrees in 2015/16, at an English university. This data was analysed according to the age of students to consider the similarities and differences in experiences of adaptations, motivations and barriers to study.

Whilst mature students seemed to adapt quickly to organising their studies, traditional-age students adapted quicker to the academic demands and to the social side of university life. Mature students also had multiple initial motivations for study and their experiences of employment, and caring for children, were influential throughout the first two-years of study. They also faced more barriers during their studies than traditional-aged students. Some of these barriers meant that they needed to be well-organised which helped them to successfully organise their academic responsibilities. Although mature students are often dealt with as a single homogenous group, this research found that their experiences were better understood when considered as separate age groups.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

“Age really is just a number when it comes to higher education, with significant numbers of mature students going to university beyond the age of 21” (Cowley, 2013).

As Cowley claims, it could be argued that age is just a number in Higher Education, because in many other aspects of our life our age no longer matters so much. With people in the Western world living longer, life-courses have lengthened with individuals often taking very different routes to the significant moments in their lives (Furlong & Cartmel, 2009). In the past, the points at which people would participate in education and employment, when they would get married and have children, often followed a very rigid pattern in terms of their age (Office for National Statistics, 2016). Whilst age seems to have become less important in the decisions made at points in our life course, the ages we engage in education still tends to follow the traditions of the past (Schuller & Watson, 2009). Students who are older than the traditional age of participation can certainly apply to university, but whether they feel a university degree is an appropriate route for them, and whether they have the same chances to succeed once they get there, is not so certain.

As will be discussed in this thesis, mature students have always been a minority group in Higher Education (HE). Progress was made in opening up access into HE in the UK so that everyone with the appropriate abilities could apply (Hall, 2017). Whilst numbers of mature students initially swelled, their participation levelled out and became static at around 20% of each year cohort (HESA, 2016). As 17-20-year olds are the majority group in HE, elements of this system of education are often designed around the needs of this group (Crozier, et al., 2008; McGivney, 1990), rather than for mature students. The increases in university fees (Hillman, 2013) and the subsequent decline of part-time (Horrocks, 2017) and modular (Taylor, 2018) HE study has inevitably forced more mature students into full-time study, which has implications in terms of suitability. Indeed, education in the UK, in general, seems to focus on young people. Compulsory education is still a rigid system, preoccupied with learning at specific ages and stages of development (Piaget, 1936). Therefore, government policy can be seen to have followed this through into HE, producing social norms in respect of appropriate ages to participate, which often discriminate against mature students, who can feel like they do not belong (McGivney, 1990).

There are many reasons as to why this might be a problem. Most importantly, from a social justice perspective, adults need second chances. Studying at a traditional age is often not a

viable, or attractive, option for some people. For many people, the desire to study at degree-level does not develop until they have experienced employment without a degree and perhaps realise that they could achieve much more in their working life (Kearns, 2014). For others, who might be reaching the end of their working life, studying for a degree could be simply the realisation of a lifelong dream (Jaimeson, 2016). Therefore, it is important that people can access HE whenever they want, particularly as life expectancies continue to rise (Gov.uk, 2014). Wider society will also benefit if we can ensure that people of any age can access and reach their potential within HE. Indeed, those aged over 21 are the largest pool of non-graduates and the untapped potential within this group represents opportunities for the UK knowledge economy. It also, more crudely, presents an opportunity for increased revenue for the UK Government.

Notwithstanding access into HE, what happens to mature students once they are in HE is also very important. With a wide range of ages in the mature student group, it is difficult to distinguish between experiences within this group. The challenges students are presented with at different ages (Schuller & Watson, 2009), suggest that experiences might be very different. Although students can have financial responsibilities and caring responsibilities at any age, students over the age of 25 are more likely to have these responsibilities. Mature students' background characteristics, such as their social class and ethnic group, are also more likely to differ to the traditional-age cohort (Access to HE, 2012), which can present additional obstacles to students' participation in HE.

Unfortunately, mature students drop out of university at twice the rate of traditional-age students in the UK (HESA, 2012, 2016). Adaptation appears to be the most important issue in terms of students' ability to continue with their studies (Piaget, 1936; Tinto, 1975) and to perform to the best of their abilities (Bourdieu, 1986; Dewey, 1938). Motivations for entering HE are also likely to affect both students' negotiation of barriers and their adaptation to the academic demands in HE. Understanding how students adapt academically and socially is essential, as both motivation and barriers tend to feed into this process. Barriers can certainly make studying harder for mature students and can inform decisions to drop out (Mannay & Morgan, 2013; Tinto, 1993).

These themes are used as the basis of this study, which looks at students' ages alongside their experiences within HE. The aims of the research and the rationale behind these aims will now be discussed, followed by an outline of the structure of the thesis.

## 1.1: Research Aims

The general aim of this research was to see whether a mature student's age affected their experiences and their negotiation of HE, and if so, *how* it affected them. The primary research question was:

- Does a mature student's age affect their experiences as an undergraduate, in Higher Education?

The research focussed on the themes of the adaptation of mature students, their motivations and the barriers they experienced whilst they negotiated their studies. The design of the project aimed to provide a detailed picture of different-aged mature students' experiences, as well as to consider the differences and similarities between traditional-aged and mature student experiences.

Mature students' adaptation is essential as this is likely to have an impact on all aspects of their undergraduate studies: their day-to-day experiences at university; their performance in assessments and their ability to complete their studies. Both academic and social adaptation are important here, as good academic adaptation should mean that students can perform to the best of their abilities (Piaget, 1936; Dewey, 1938), but poor social adaptation might have a negative influence on both performance (Bourdieu, 1984) and persistence (Tinto, 1975). By examining students' initial motivations to engage in undergraduate study (Carre, 2000), it is possible to see what can drive mature students to succeed. Previous literature notes the significance of age-related differences (Rogers, 2003; Schuller & Watson, 2009) between mature and traditional-age students, but there is little existing research that considers the differences in motivation within the larger mature student group, by age, or whether motivations change over time. How these motivations feed into students' adaptation is also of interest here.

The same can also be said in terms of the influence of barriers on students' adaptation. Some HE research shows that, in comparison to young students, mature undergraduates are less likely to have traditional entry qualifications (McVitty & Morris, 2012), which can be a disadvantage for an undergraduate student. It is also evident that mature students are often more likely to be juggling study alongside family (McGivney, 1996) or employment responsibilities (Callender, 2008), and to have declared disabilities (Shevlin, et al., 2004). Though, as with motivation, much of this research does not show whether this affects younger and older mature students in the same way. Nor does it consider whether mature students are able to overcome these barriers during the course of their studies, and if so, how they do this. This research intends to extend understanding of mature students' experiences of barriers, by considering the differences in

experiences of different-aged mature students, as well as comparing these experiences to those of traditional-aged students. It also considers how barriers affect adaptation in HE over a longer period of time (two-years), than that covered in previous research (Bowl, 2001; Gonzáles-Arnal & Kilkey, 2009).

As previously mentioned, as much of the research on mature students considers all students over the age of 21 as a single group (Carre, 2000; Foster, 2009), this research aimed to break this category up into more meaningful age groups, to provide age-specific detail on their experiences. Different levels of data were used so that individual experiences could be compared to the experiences of their year group. The above themes formed a framework for the research questions used in this study:

- Do mature students adapt differently to university life and if so, why is this the case?
- Do mature students have different motivations for study and if so, why is this the case?
- Do mature students face different barriers to study and how might these differ?
- Do adaptation techniques, motivations and barriers change in the first two-years of mature students' undergraduate studies?

## 1.2: Structure of Thesis

This thesis begins with a review of literature. In Chapter 2, contextual information is provided on HE policy and mature student participation. This is followed by a detailed consideration of previous research on mature and traditional-age students' experiences in respect of the main themes: adaptation, motivation and study barriers, in chapters 3, 4 & 5.

In Chapter 6, the design of the study is outlined, which includes a discussion of the methods used, the research sample and an evaluation of these decisions. The findings will then be discussed in chapters 7, 8 & 9. Firstly, the adaptation of the students is considered, both within the mature student age groups and in contrast to the traditional-age students, in Chapter 7. This is followed by Chapter 8, which looks at the differences in initial motivations and whether these motivations changed during their studies. In Chapter 9 there is a consideration of the barriers the mature student groups experienced during their studies, again in contrast to the traditional-age students. The final chapter discusses the implications of these findings, considering if age matters in HE, and if so, why it does. This chapter also reflects on the strengths and weaknesses of the research, identifying opportunities for future research.

# Chapter 2: Mature Student Participation and HE Policy

## Introduction

This opening chapter examines mature student participation in detail, to establish why they are an undergraduate group that warrant investigation. It considers the influence of HE policy on mature students and their patterns of participation, both within the mature student group and in comparison to traditional-age students.

Firstly, consideration will be given to why mature students are an important group and then the discussion will move to definitions of this group. Following this, the historical policy context and that have affected mature student participation in HE will be discussed, including the impact of the introduction of tuition fees and the subsequent reduction in numbers of part-time students and part-time provision. Then the discussion turns to the detail on mature student full-time participation in HE, including factors that affect their access to HE and their ability to continue undergraduate study. The chapter ends with a consideration of current HE policy, in terms of issues relating to meeting mature students' needs and providing opportunity for them to be socially mobile by accessing HE.

## 2.1: Why are Mature Students Important?

'There is considerable reluctance to admit older people to some courses, on the grounds that their success rate in the past has not been high. Providers of these courses should ask themselves whether this may have more to do with their own expectations and assumptions than with the supposed defects in older minds' (Fulton, 1981, p. 34).

Fulton's comments above sum up, to some degree, why this investigation into mature student experience is so important. Firstly, the attitudes towards mature students highlighted in these comments seem to remain unchanged three decades on: mature students still drop out at a greater rate than traditional-age students (HESA, 2016), so they present a risky prospect to some HE providers (Bowl & Hughes, 2014). Secondly, there is a suggestion here that mature students are somehow inherently inferior, when compared to the capability of their traditional-aged peers. Sadly, this view continues to reflect the attitudes of both mature students (Chapman, 2017; Reay, 2004) and some providers (Graham, 2013). McGivney entitled her 1990 book, on non-participant adults, 'Education's for other people' and includes older adults (age 50+) in the

typology of adults that feel this way. Whether this otherness is restricted to those aged over 50 is debateable (Crozier, et al., 2008). Thankfully, things can change over time, as in the National Adult Learner Survey (Department for Business, 2010), two decades later, whilst this negative attitude to education is still evident, there appears to be an improved attitude amongst adults aged 55-69. Attitudes to learning and participation in education in general were assessed, and adults who were classed as 'Learning Avoidant' and 'Too Old to Learn' were largely much older adults aged 70+. However, as will be discussed later in this chapter, in the attitudes of HE institutions and the rhetoric in more recent HE policy, focus appears to have centred on meeting the needs of young students (aged 17-20), despite efforts to widen HE out to mature students in the past. Their vulnerability as a group is highlighted by the negative views associated with mature students, often reflected by both the adults who could be mature students (McGivney, 1990), and also from providers and policy-makers within the education system.

Mature students continued participation in HE in the UK remains increasingly important, for a number of reasons. It is evident that with people living longer, in much better physical health than previous generations (Gov.uk, 2014), there is future potential for expanding HE out to older cohorts of students, who might not previously have thought HE was an option. As people are living much longer in general, the structure of employment has been altered to be more age-neutral in design to ward against age-discrimination (Her Majesty's Government, 2010). It seems appropriate, therefore, to consider the extent to which age might influence people in Higher Education (HE), an increasingly important arena for accessing employment. More importantly, mature students are true second-chance learners, seeking education in the hope that they can change their life-chances, and often their family's life-chances too (Reay, 2002; Callender, et al., 2014; Hinton-Smith, 2012). McVitty & Morris (2012) maintain that HE qualifications act as a means to gain access to good pay and conditions for mature students, who may have already felt the limits in employment, because of their lack of qualifications.

These improved life-chances also have benefits for the UK economy, as they improve the skills within the working-age population. Policy reports such as the Leitch Review (2006) recognised this, suggesting that 40% of adults should be skilled to graduate level or above, by 2020, to ensure a strong economy. He highlighted that people already in employment needed to be the focus for advancing the UK's skill base and underlined that school improvements would not be enough to solve the UK's problems with skills. By 2006, 70% of the 2020 workforce would have already finished compulsory education. Whilst many of the recommendations relate to vocational and basic skill development, he also underlines that only a quarter of adults possessed a degree in 2006, which compared poorly to comparative nations. Universities were

asked to improve their engagement with employers, and try to increase co-funded workplace degrees, to improve Level 5 qualifications and skills within employment (2006). The steep increase in the number of graduates entering the UK labour market, (17% in 1992 to 38% in 2013 (Office for National Statistics, 2013)) confirms the general increase in demand for higher qualifications. Though, as will be discussed later in this chapter, most undergraduates are still traditional-aged (17-20).

In order to keep up with younger people in employment, as jobs continue to become more complex, being able to gain qualifications and skills later in life is essential in order to improve and protect individuals' employability. Opportunities can be restricted for people in employment if they do not have degrees, due to the consistent inflation of qualifications, described by Dore (1976) as a 'Diploma Disease'. Dore maintains that societies have come to accept the growing bureaucratic processes which use educational records to measure performance and suitability for employment. He suggests that these processes have been accompanied by a steady rise in qualifications that are needed for any role in employment. For example, a job that someone could have previously attained with no qualifications now requires specific qualifications, or jobs which previously required a degree, now require a Master's degree. To some extent, the increasing demands for rising skills content within employment over the last 30 years has influenced educational policy in this respect, though adults already in employment are likely to have felt the sharp end of these developments. Jenkins' (2017) research illustrates the impact of this inflation of qualifications on working age adults, using the 1958 British Birth Cohort data. He illustrates that the proportion of jobs requiring graduate qualifications, in Britain, rose from 1986 (10%) to 2012 (26%) and those that did not require qualifications reduced at the same time (38% to 23%). He found that many of the people who upgraded their qualification in mid-life (age 33-50) were pursuing vocational qualifications, highlighting the focus on employment. However, as the cohort Jenkins was investigating were only a single year cohort and were from the baby boomer generation, it is unlikely that these patterns are still generalizable. Baby Boomers were not only the largest generation, in comparison with previous and subsequent generations, but they are more affluent and have been influential in economic and social change. Consequently, it is difficult to make comparisons between them and other generational groups (Huber & Skidmore, 2003). Nevertheless, this research shows how career outcomes can influence people to return to education. Given that many well-paid jobs are now likely to be at graduate level, being able to upgrade qualifications as a mature student has become increasingly important.



In the light of the recent recession and continued austerity, in the UK, changing qualification requirements mean that people already in employment with no qualifications are more vulnerable to redundancy or job losses (Kearns, 2014). Mature students may be increasingly unlikely to be able to enter the qualification competition at all, without the support of educational policy. As will be discussed later in this chapter, the reduction in funding and the requirement to pay fees make studying as a mature student much more difficult, particularly if you are from a low-income background. This has been acknowledged by both White (2007) and Gorard & Smith (2007), who found that those who left education directly after compulsory schooling were less likely to try to improve their education over the remainder of their lives. Yet, Widening Participation (WP) outreach in HE, as will be discussed later in this chapter, has appeared to direct their efforts towards young WP students, rather than mature (Aimhigher Research and Consultancy Network, 2013; McVitty & Morris, 2012). This lack of support might have resulted from older adults being disinterested in education, or alternatively, this lack of support may have resulted in older adults perceiving that education is not for them. Field (2006) debates whether such attitudes are due to the policy changes in the 1990s where older learners started to become marginalised, both in terms of funding and WP, or simply because older people experience less pressure to participate.

## 2.2: Defining Mature Students

The HESA criteria for students' classification by age highlights that students are classed as *young* if they are under 21 years of age when they enter HE to study at undergraduate level, and *mature* if they are aged 21 or over (HESA, 2019). This classification is different for postgraduates who are classified as *young* if they are under 25 years, and *mature* if they are 25 years or over when they enrol in HE. This section will consider mature students' classification.

Farrant (1981, p. 54) maintains that definition of students as mature or young was not considered necessary by the Robbins Committee, who undertook an investigation into Higher Education between 1961 and 1963. The Robbins Report (Committee on Higher Education, 1963) revolutionised HE, increasing access on a large scale. This expanded the sector substantially, as this growth was based on the principle that HE should be available to anyone with the desire and ability to study. Farrant (1981) highlights that there were small numbers of mature students participating when the inquiry began, with only 10,500 entrants over the age of 21 that year (14% of UK home students in 1961). However, Hughes (1973) considers mature students in 1970/71 to be a much smaller proportion (3%) of the student population, essentially because he uses the age of 25 to distinguish mature students. This deviation from the classification of a

mature student at age 21 is also reflected, more recently, in respect of applications for student finance in the UK. Students are automatically deemed independent for student finances purposes at age 25, and those aged 21-24 are automatically deemed to be dependent on their parents, unless they demonstrate that they have been financially independent for 36 months (NUS, 2013). Therefore, the perception of the age of a mature student might be complicated by this differential treatment. Hughes' (1973) use of the age 25 as a mature student marker also highlights a potential difference in the participation of different age groups within the mature student category. For example, the notable difference in mature student proportions cited by Hughes (1973) and Farrant (1981) suggests that the total mature student population might actually have contained a majority of younger mature students, aged 21-24, both at the time of Robbin's inquiry and in the following decade.

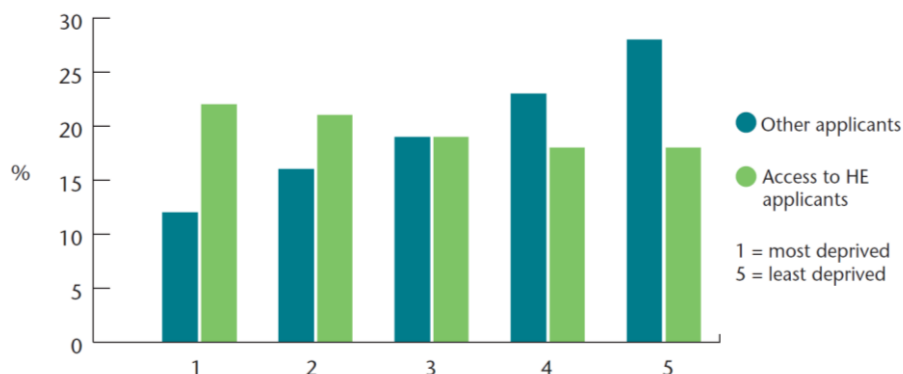
Farrant suggests that distinctions between young and mature students may have emerged because of a growing preoccupation with their difference, rather than merely because they were a smaller proportion. This is implied in his comments here:

'The implicit assumption in DES's method for projecting numbers is that the young entrants arrive on the wave running through the educational system from the schools and FE colleges, but that entrants who have passed the old age of majority are sufficiently distant from their compulsory and sixth form education for them not to be viewed as delayed entrants' (Farrant, 1981, p. 54).

This is also echoed by Furlong and Cartmel (2009, p. 71) who contend that there has been a long held view that "abnormal" patterns of experience' [are] seen as symptomatic of a 'problematic university career'. In essence, mature students are defined by being unconventional in contrast to their traditional-aged peers, who are seen to follow a normal educational path.

Mature students in the UK tend to share some common social characteristics and common reasons for delaying their entry to HE (Gorard & Smith, 2007). McVitty and Morris (2012) maintain that the demographic profile of mature students follows narratives of Widening Participation. Their online survey of 3,963 mature students, for Million+ and the National Union of Students (NUS), ran between 3rd November and 9th December 2011. Aside from their difference in age, they found that the mature student participants were more likely than young students to hold non-traditional qualifications, to be female, to be from a Black or ethnic minority group and to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This adds an important dimension to the participation of this group, as their continued access into HE could be seen as even more important, from a social justice perspective. This will be discussed in more detail in the participation section, later in this chapter.

Figure 2.1: UCAS Rate of Participation by Students from Low HE Participation Areas (Access to HE, 2012, p. 2)



To demonstrate how the profile of mature students differs to that of traditional-age students, using social class as an example, Figure 2.1 compares applications by deprivation quintiles. It highlights that Access to HE courses, which are designed to feed mature students onto undergraduate degrees, tend to have a more even distribution of students across quintiles, than for other qualifications. For the *other applicants* category, which is likely to be dominated by traditional-age A-level entrants, the distribution across these categories is more skewed towards to the less deprived quintiles. This highlights that undergraduates from Access courses are much more likely to come from the most deprived areas, representing over 20% of students in both of the two quintiles classified as the most deprived. This contrasts to the *other applicants* group, with around 12% coming from the most deprived quintile and 16% from the second most deprived. This suggests that those from lower socio-economic groups are more likely to study as mature students, than as traditional-aged undergraduates (assuming that other applicants are school-leavers). Schuller and Watson (2009) highlight that the relation between social class and participation has been closely tied, throughout time: the higher a person's social class the more likely they are to participate. Therefore, it follows that those from lower socio-economic classes are less likely to participate in HE at a traditional age and consequently more likely to need, or want, to re-train later in life.

Consequently, mature student participation is important, because members of this group might face additional barriers in gaining access to HE due to their race, social class and gender. The direct and indirect discrimination they experience, as a result of being outside the conventional age for undergraduate study, is also a primary concern.

### 2.3: Policy Developments Affecting Mature Student Participation

There are many reasons why people choose not to stay in education after school and participate in HE later in their life. But, as previously discussed there are also people in the mature student group who will never participate, feeling that education is not for them (McGivney, 1990; Department for Business, 2010). However, the policy changes in HE can have an important impact on the participation of mature students, which will be considered in this section.

Following the recommendations of the Robbins Report, real progress was made in the UK in increasing HE participation across a broader range of social backgrounds, as well as in increasing the participation of students classed as mature (Committee on Higher Education, 1963). As previously mentioned, this report sought to rebalance access into HE by evolving HE provision from an elite system to one that was available to all. Farrant (1981) highlights that the level of mature student enrolment (age 21+) grew rapidly after Robbins' reforms, from the 10,500 entrants in 1961 to 17,700 by 1966/67. However, younger students' (aged 17-20) enrolments also rose at this time, so the proportion of mature students actually remained fairly consistent (16%).

Notwithstanding the progress made by Robbins' reforms, Hughes (1973) demonstrates an increasing appetite for further improvements to increase mature students' access of HE, following these reforms. He argues that social class and family background continued to affect decisions to stay on at school and believed that structural changes were needed, to help individuals to access HE when they were older. The changes proposed were preparatory courses to bridge the gap between school and HE, recognition of all forms of credits from secondary education as well as more opportunities for part-time study and financial support. In the subsequent decade, attitudes such as those expressed by Hughes gained momentum, leading to what McGivney describes as an 'ever louder chorus' (1990, p. 5), from both national bodies and central government, to take a more flexible approach to recruitment to widen participation. She highlights that this resulted in notable developments to help improve participation in under-represented groups, largely echoing the earlier suggestions made by Hughes (1973).

The Open University is one example of such developments, created so that increased access to new technologies, such as radio and television, could be utilised to make HE available to a much wider audience. It gained its Royal charter in 1969, and a few years later, in 1971, it began enrolling students onto their modular foundation degrees with 43,000 people applying for one of the 25,000 places available that year (OU, 2018). Squires (1981) maintains that the development of the OU was significant in the participation of mature students, as it

demonstrated that people without traditional A level qualifications could study for a degree with just as much success as those who studied with these qualifications. He also contends that the OU opposed the myth that 'old dogs cannot learn new tricks' (Squires, 1981, p. 150), highlighting the potential of mature students' increased participation in HE.

The merging of universities and polytechnics after 1992 extended this expansion of access (Field, 2006) and provided increased second chances for mature students, as well as chances for young people who might not have considered going to university because of their class, race or gender. Mature students were particularly important in helping to sustain this expansion of HE (Richardson, 1994). In 1979/80 full-time UK students over 21 years of age comprised only 13% of new undergraduates (Squires, 1981). Smith's (2008) review of literature on mature students notes that numbers doubled between the mid 1980's (n= 150,000) and mid-1990's (n=300,000) and then slowed down following the introduction of fees. Although Smith's use of numbers of students rather than percentages makes it difficult to understand what proportion of the undergraduate population they represented at this point, to see how traditional-aged student enrolments might also have changed. However, this will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter in the section on participation.

The government were unable to continue to subsidise this expansion, and the Dearing Report (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997) recommended that students become responsible for paying their fees, to move to an approach where universities would focus on meeting student needs. Toyne (1998, p. 70) argued that the Dearing recommendations were underpinned by 'customer' concerns, to make universities become accountable for the quality of their provision. Whilst there were concerns about how fees would impact on mature students (discussed in the next section) there were also some positive changes in policy in relation to provision that might support mature student enrolment. Firstly, Dearing's reforms challenged the long-standing divide between the educational provision in Further Education colleges (FE) and HE institutions, by opening out HE provision into FE, in an attempt to widen participation (UCU, 2010). This was important for mature students, as undergraduate students studying HE in FE colleges are more likely to be older and to be studying through part-time routes (UCU, 2010; Burton, et al., 2011; Elliot & Brna, 2009).

McGivney (1990) points out that by 1998 Local Education Authorities had launched a range of initiatives to provide greater educational opportunities for adults, such as introducing basic educational programmes and Access to HE courses to bridge gaps in education, as well as increasing the opportunities for part-time and flexible study. They also expanded advice and

guidance services. McGivney predicted that such developments would provide a more responsive post-compulsory education system, which would facilitate 'movement between different types and levels of education at all stages of people's lives' (McGivney, 1990, p. 6). Consequently, the importance of mature students' participation in HE, and in education in general, was successfully acknowledged and carved into both HE policy and practice.

Unfortunately, some of the positive effects of these policy changes were later undermined by more recent policy, which inevitably had a significant impact on mature student enrolment.

### 2:3.1: University Fees & Funding

Financial factors associated with studying in HE tend to have a bigger impact on both mature students and students from other non-participant groups. As mature students are more likely to be financially vulnerable (McGivney, 1996), changes to funding policies in HE presented a rather bleak future for their participation (Burns, 2012). Significant changes were made to the funding of HE following Dearing's report, though the withdrawal of the older students' allowance, in 1995, had already highlighted the erosion of funding to support them (MacErlean, 1996). Nevertheless, Toyne (1998) argues that HE needed to change in order satisfy the demands of individual students, as shown in the findings of Callender's report for Dearing (NCIHE, 1997). Once university fees were introduced this seemed to have a much more notable influence on the participation of mature students.

As previously mentioned, the withdrawal of the older students' allowance had the first detrimental effect on mature students (Gorard & Smith, 2007; MacErlean, 1996) a few years before fees were introduced. This allowance had given students over the age of 25 a grant of up to £1070. This grant had acknowledged that they were more likely than younger students to have dependents and increased financial responsibilities. When it was proposed in parliament that this should be withdrawn, it provoked an Early Day Motion from 113 MPs, to reverse its decision to abolish it stating:

'mature students are likely to have significant financial responsibilities as a result of periods of employment before studying and that many are responsible for caring for dependants; appreciates that mature students are frequently amongst the most highly motivated and successful of students; further recognises that there is a vast pool of talent in society of people who missed out on the chance to enter higher education earlier in their lives who should be encouraged to undertake further study and not deterred from doing so' (UK Parliament, 1995).

Unfortunately, this attempt to reverse this cost saving decision failed. After the Dearing report, although it recommended continuing to fund HE students with a mixture of loans and grants for

maintenance, the government took the controversial decision to move to a loan only provision for maintenance in the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998 (Hillman, 2013). At this time a £1000 per year means-tested, upfront, tuition fee was introduced (Toyne, 1998). However, it was later accepted that this may present a barrier to low-participation groups, who could not afford the upfront fee, so the HE White Paper of January 2003 proposed both the reintroduction of maintenance grants from the 2004/05 academic year and the replacement of up-front tuition fees with a new variable fee, funded by student loans, which would be capped at £3000 from the 2006/07 academic year (Hillman, 2013). The loans system arguably made HE accessible to anyone, regardless of socio-economic status. However, when this cap was lifted (first in 2008 then again in 2012 which tripled the upper limit tuition fee to £9000 per year) this threatened to price many students out of HE participation (Burns, 2012) and potentially unravel the gains made in equalising access into HE (Hinton-Smith, 2012) for low-participation groups, such as mature students.

Indeed, McGivney (1990) and Smith (2008) both underline how important financial support is for mature students' continued participation in HE, both from the perspective of individual circumstances, but also in terms of the support they need once they are in HE. McGivney recognised that, because mature students needed more support, they would be seen as more costly to institutions and, therefore, less desirable by some of these institutions. Yet, whilst the introduction of fees presented a potential barrier for mature students, concerns such as those expressed by McGivney (1990), years before, were answered. This was because HEFCE linked additional institutional funding to their numbers of mature students, students with disabilities and students from low participation areas (Smith, 2008). The premium given to universities was there to provide extra resources to support their admission and retention. Smith contends that, for mature students, this funding was based on the assumption that they would require additional learning support to develop the skills required in HE, as also highlighted in the past by McGivney (1973), because of the gap in educational experience.

Regardless of the support provided for mature students within HE institutions, higher fees were clearly significant in terms of the levels of their participation. Toyne (1998) believed that requiring students to pay for HE would run a risk of triggering a drop in demand. As feared, mature student applications dropped after fees were initially introduced, notably for those from poor areas who had no previous academic experience. Interestingly applications from young students from poorer areas remained static (Major, 2000). The decline of mature student applications is also evident in the comparison of patterns in mature student HE applications in England and Scotland, where home students are not required to pay fees. For example, in

England, mature student applications fell, with numbers of full-time applications between 2010-2014 falling by 14% and part-time by 40%, following the 2012 hike in fees (NIACE, 2014). In Scotland, in comparison, an overall rise in students entering university was put down to a 7% increase in applicants from older students aged 20 and over (UCAS, 2015). This suggests that funding could be a significant issue stopping mature students, but not traditional-age students, from entering HE. Therefore, accessing suitable funding and financial support continues to be a significant factor feeding into mature students' decisions on participating in HE (Gorard, et al., 2007).

In addition, the introduction of fees has had an effect on the way in which HE is perceived by students. Jones (2010) explains, in his article, that the main effect of top-up tuition fees has been the idea of the student as a paying customer, which has resulted in a significant change in expectations. He maintains that not only do students expect greater value for money, because they now pay fees, but they also expect a better quality overall student experience from their HE institution. This is also acknowledged by Williams (2012), whose research will be discussed in more detail in the section on recent policy changes, later in this chapter.

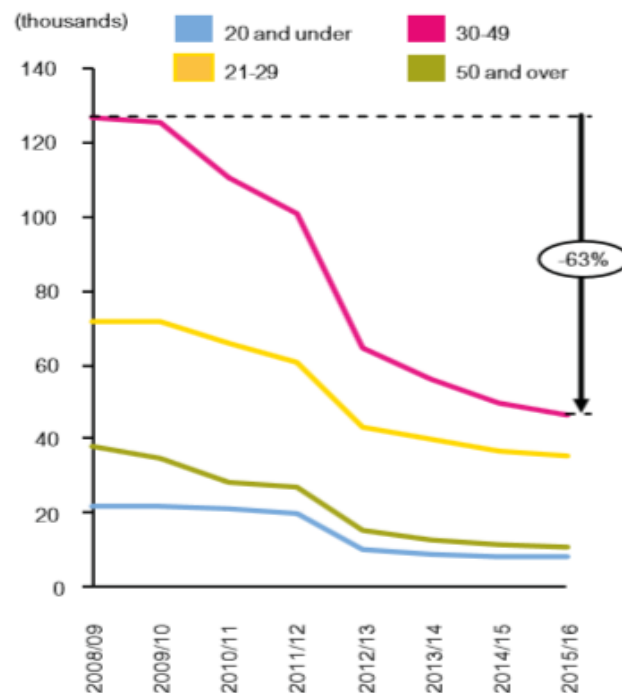
### 2.3.2: Part-time HE Provision

As highlighted above, mature student applications in part-time undergraduate study have declined dramatically since the hike in fees in 2012. As part-time study was an important route for many mature students, its decline marks a significant change in their access into HE.

Toyne (1998), writing just after the Dearing Report was published, maintains that most of the recommendations were too focussed on the assumed needs of school leavers, despite the increased participation of mature students in HE. The decline of part-time provision could certainly be seen as evidence of this. Although the flexibility that mature students require, in order to participate in HE, developed after the period of expansion, this has been eroded as a result of the direction of government policy. Many people who would have participated through part-time routes are now either forced into full-time study, or choose not to participate at all.



Figure 2.2: HESA English-Domiciled First-Year Part-time Undergraduates, by Age (Horrocks, 2017, p. 8)



The decline in numbers of part-time students is illustrated in Figure 2.2, above. This highlights a significant drop in mature students enrolling on part-time undergraduate degrees. The age group most severely affected by this appears to be the 30-49 age group, although it is evident that there has been a drop in part-time numbers across all age groups. The funding difficulties and the subsequent decline of the availability of part-time courses make participation much harder for those who do not enter HE at age 18. Callender and Thompson (2018) highlight that studying part-time has been important for social mobility and equity, particularly for mature students, who might struggle with studying full-time because of family and work responsibilities.

Horrocks (2017) demonstrates that the significant drop in numbers of First Year, part-time, students (61%) since 2008/09 (shown in Figure 2.2), directly relates to the government raising the cap on part-time fees to £6,750 a year. He states (2017, p. 3):

‘The unanticipated decline of the part-time higher education sector has led the architects of the 2012 reforms to conclude that the current funding system for helping adults to study part-time is not fit-for-purpose.’

The Open University (OU) is the largest provider of part-time and modular HE study, and this crisis has had serious consequences for mature students’ access to HE, through this route. This continued pattern resulted in plans to reduce the OU degree provision by more than a third, in order to contain their budget deficit (Taylor, 2018). This same pattern is evident across HE part-

time provision as Callender and Thompson's (2018) analysis of HESA data also reveals that the decline in part-time students was the direct result of the introduction of higher fees, coupled with loan ineligibility. They argue that this presented a barrier to many students who would have previously participated in HE. Their findings mirror the detail in Horrocks' report (2017), although Horrocks' report often focusses only on the OU. As the numbers of part-time students has dropped, as seen in the OU, part-time courses have also been discontinued by HE providers, so there are fewer courses and places available. This may mean that mature students who are determined to participate in HE are being increasingly forced to study on full-time undergraduate programmes, because part-time courses are more difficult to find, as well as more difficult to fund.

## 2.4: Mature Student Participation

Since the expansion of HE, mature student numbers swelled. Following the initial boom, after Robbins' report (Committee on Higher Education, 1963), numbers have clearly dropped significantly in terms of part-time enrolment, though they can be seen to have merely levelled in terms of full-time enrolment. It is likely that full-time numbers have been bolstered by the decline in the provision of part-time undergraduate degrees.

Despite the challenges they faced following the withdrawal of the older students' allowance and the introduction of fees (Burns, 2012), mature students have continued to apply to university as full-time students in similar proportions to previous years. McVitty and Morris (2012) highlight that applications increased in general from 2000 to 2010, but applications for mature students increased rapidly in the 2005/06 academic year, with an increase of 48% compared to only a 29% increase in applications for traditional-age students (29%).

Gorard and Smith (2007) reviewed research in this area and suggested that not many people will enter HE as mature students, not because of barriers, but because many people leave school with a negative learner identity. They believe that this can be a combination of negative experiences at school, family poverty and a lack of role models. This can result in negative learning identities and a sense that education is 'not for us', as also noted by McGivney (1990). Gorard and Smith (2007) also found that decisions to enter HE are not made shortly before entering HE, but are often made many years before. They suggest that decisions not to engage in education, and not to return to it as a mature student, tend to relate to their poor performance in exams in the past. However, they highlight that there are other factors that seem to influence some of these individuals who return when they are older. People who are geographically mobile were seen to be more likely to participate, as were those who had parents

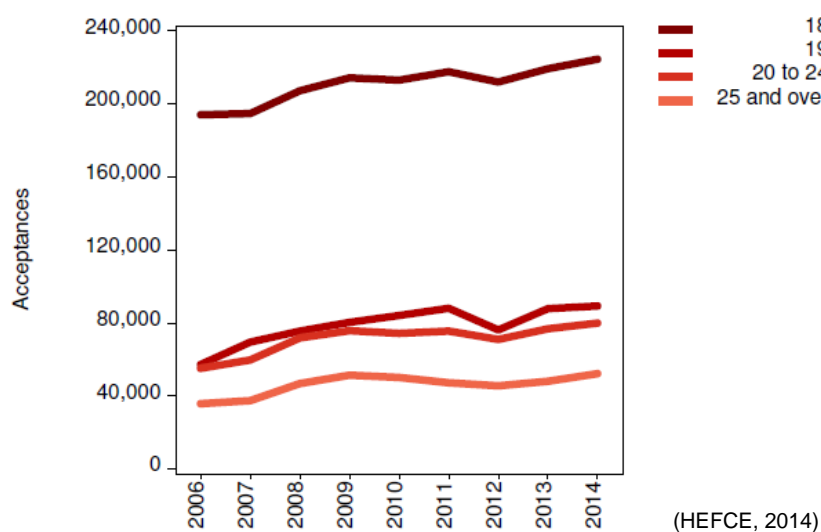
that were lifelong learners. Feinstein et al. (2004) also found that parental education and income were important influences in the early years of a child's education.

It is difficult to understand the participation of different age-groups within the mature group, as information on participation by age has generally been delivered in a form that only identifies students who are traditional-aged and those who are classed as 'mature'. For example, the information collected about students from universities by HESA has often been published with only two age groups 'young' (up to 21) and 'mature' (over 21). McGivney (2011) contends that defining mature students as anyone over the age of 21 has made analysis difficult, because this does not show sub-groups within this category. This means that it is difficult to observe national patterns of participation across mature student age groups. Whilst this detailed information is not made readily available by HESA, they do collect this detail through the Student Record reports, collated by UK HE providers. UCAS sometimes publish data that gives details by age groups, showing application data for age 17 and under and then for individual ages from 18-24. The mature student categories in these publications are more detailed (25-29, 30-39 and 40+) allowing for greater analyses by age. However, this information only applies to applications, not enrolment, but it can give some idea as to which ages of students choose to participate.

UCAS reported that there were some changes in application rates, according to age, for the 2015/16 academic year. They highlighted that there was a rise in applications for students over the age of 20 in 2014. However, in 2015 in England, university applications from 18 and 19-year-olds had increased but there was a reduction in applications from older students. Application rates reduced in both 20 to 29, and 30 to 60 age groups (UCAS, 2015). Though, proportionally, they suggest that more applications are made by students from older age groups later than the January UCAS application deadline, unlike applicants aged under 20. They also highlight that mature students are more likely to apply directly to their university of choice, which means that they do not capture these students' details, so both of these issues mean it is more difficult to interpret patterns of participation by age.

UCAS data also confirms (see Figure 1.3) that the rates of acceptance across HE in the UK was consistent for both the 20-24 age group and those over 25, with a slight dip when higher fees were introduced in 2012. The rise in mature student applications in Scotland (UCAS, 2015) and the drop in their applications in England (NIACE, 2014), averages out in this data to level out the overall effect on UK acceptances. Since then acceptances for these age groups have increased slowly up to 2014 alongside a sharper increase for those aged 18.

Figure 2.3: UCAS End of Cycle Report 2014 – UK Acceptances by Age Group



Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data confirms that the participation rate of full-time mature students in the UK has remained consistent at around 20% (2011-12 20%/2012-13 21%, 2013-14 21%). Callender and Thompson (2008) explain that the participation of young students from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s more than doubled and then remained at the same rate until 2007 when their participation began to steadily rise again. This rise is illustrated in their analysis of student participation in full and part-time HE study, from 2010-2014 (see Table 2.4), which contrasts to the declining rate in full-time mature student age groups. It is also evident in Table 2.1 that whilst part-time entrants decreased across all age groups, this decline was more dramatic for students aged over 30 years. In addition, this shows that the decline in part-time entrants has been at least double the decline among full-time students, even among young students.

Table 2.1: Increases in Initial Entrants by Age 2010-2014 (Callender & Thompson, 2018, p. 12)

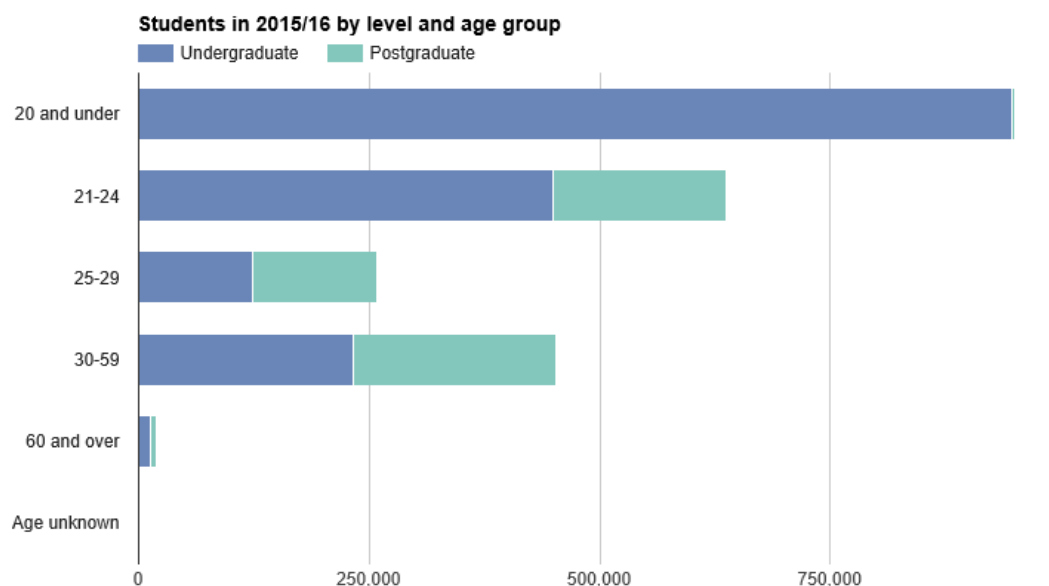
Age	Full-time		Part-time	
17-19	25,745	(12%)	-2,070	(-22%)
20-24	575	(1%)	-4,470	(-27%)
25-29	-315	(-3%)	-5,290	(-38%)
30-34	-455	(-7%)	-5,665	(-47%)
35-40	-330	(-8%)	-4,750	(-49%)
40-60	-505	(-8%)	-12,350	(-53%)

Note: Source and data definitions at annex A4

2010 data adjusted to take account of the change in population profile by 2014.

Although Callender and Thompson (2008) provide some detailed analysis of participation by age, as previously mentioned, there is often a lack of distinction between different age cohorts in national data. This makes it difficult to understand HE participation within the mature student age group, because they are placed into a single group (21+), so differences within this group are generally not considered. Some HESA reports break down participation within this age group, but they tend to focus on younger mature students, probably because there are more of them within the mature student group. Figure 2.4, for example, is from one of their more recent reports on participation.

Figure 2.4: Undergraduate and Graduate Students 2015/16 (HESA, 2017a)



It is apparent here that there are twice the number of undergraduate students aged 20, compared with students aged 21-24. As this is the largest mature student group, numbers of students in the groups aged 25 and over appear much smaller in comparison. The aged 60 and over group is particularly small, which suggests that most mature students are aged under 59 years. Though as the 30-59 group contains such a large range of ages, it is difficult to see whether certain ages in this group participate more than others. Students in their 30s, for example, might be a larger group than those in their 50s. Patterns in participation can also be seen in Field's (2006) discussion of participation in formal and non-formal education, although this is not specific to HE. He suggests (2006, p. 128) that age '*constitutes the third great determinant of participation*' alongside class and gender, contending that the young get the most resources in terms of their participation, and those aged over 60 get the least. This suggests that funding indirectly discriminates against older-aged students.

For the over-60 age group, their participation as undergraduates and postgraduates, shown in Figure 2.4, is in keeping with White's (2012) research on the age of participation in formal education more generally, where people over 60 were much less inclined to be involved in education. But whether this attitude starts to develop at 50 or even 40 is impossible to ascertain from these data. As mature students in the older categories tend to be grouped together in publicly available data, as in Figure 1.4, it is difficult to understand how a person's age might prompt their decision to engage in education. However, those who have examined the detail on participation by age contend that formal participation declines as age increases (Department for Business, 2010; Gorard, et al., 2002; Field, 2006).

Data from UCAS on accepted applications for this cohort year also helps to examine UK participation by age in more detail, to provide context to the case study group. Table 2.2 shows this data, which breaks up students' ages in the traditional-age group category and the mature student category. Students aged 18 were the most common age amongst accepted UK undergraduate students, representing over half of the UK undergraduates who had their applications accepted.

Table 2.2: UK Accepted Applications 2015/16 by age group (adapted) (UCAS, 2015)

Age	Accepted Applications	%
17 and under	1415	0.31%
18	235360	50.76%
19	91760	19.79%
20	32970	7.11%
21-25	53520	11.54%
26-30	18810	4.06%
31-35	11125	2.4%
36+	18755	4.04%

It is evident in Table 2.2 that, in the UK, most students tend to access HE when they are 18 and 19 or in the youngest mature age group (21-25). As those aged over 30 are split into two different age groups, it is apparent that participation in the 31-35 age group is half the proportion of students participating aged over 36. It would have been useful to have seen how participation was spread across the older age group to see if participation in the 36+ group to see if there was a decline in participation in older ages (e.g. 50, 60) in keeping with the literature (Field, 2006; White, 2012). The grouping of ages here is also a little problematic, as it is not in keeping with HESA data (21-25 rather than 21-24 and 31-35 rather than 30+). This means it is

difficult to compare with other data, but has more age detail, which is useful in helping to understand patterns of participation by age in this year group, nationally.

As the younger age groups were much larger than the other mature student age groups, this might mean that universities provide services and organise teaching for the majority of students, who are aged 18-25 years, and influence perceptions of students and attitudes towards them. Whilst this data is helpful in detailing the age-related context of the wider mature student group, unfortunately the sex, social class, ethnicity and disability details for the young and mature student groups was not available. This would have been helpful in building a more detailed picture of the types of backgrounds mature students come from, as shown earlier in the Access to HE student data (figure 1.1) (Access to HE, 2012).

The specific age of students certainly seems to be important, as some research argues that the older you get, the less motivated you are to engage in learning, in general. As previously discussed, this was reflected in the National Adult Learner Survey segmentation with the 'Learning Avoidant' and 'Too Old to Learn' groups, who were generally populated with learners aged 70+ who were disinterested in learning, believing it is not intended for people like them (Department for Business, 2010). Field (2006) debates whether this is due to policy changes in the 1990s, where older learners were neglected. He also highlights that, as young people are the most likely to be unemployed and therefore in need of further education, older people would be under less pressure to engage in further education or HE.

There also seems to have been a change in the mature student participation trends according to gender. Sargant et al. (1997) found that women were more likely to not participate in any learning (41%) than men were (31%), in their analysis of NIACE interview survey (n=4673) with adults aged over 16, living in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Women were also less likely to take part in learning after compulsory schooling. However, both Aldridge (2011), White (2012) and Jenkins (2017) found in their later analyses that females were more likely to participate in learning than males. White (2012) found that women were slightly more likely to say they were participating in learning, or had done recently, in the NIACE 2004, 2005 and 2006 surveys. The sex of respondents appeared to make little difference in those who reported participation in later surveys (2007-10), however. Aldridge uses the NIACE 2011 survey on adult education to show that women were more likely than men to participate in post-compulsory learning. Though, she highlights that formal learning continues to be the least common form (24%) of learning among adults in England (aged 16+).

This also appears to be the case in respect of HE. Jenkins (2017) looked at the patterns of participation in HE for a group of baby boomers (n= 4475) in the UK, during midlife. Using the 1958 National Child Development Study, he considered who upgraded to undergraduate degree level (Level 4) qualifications, between the ages of 33 and 50. He found that almost one in five of the women in this age range upgraded their qualifications, compared to around one in eight of the men in the cohort. However, the generalisability of Jenkins' findings is questionable as he removed the people who already had level 4 qualifications and those who had very low qualifications from the analysis. It would have been useful to have included all the cases to see what proportion were already qualified and whether those with low qualifications entered HE. Jenkins assumed that people with low qualifications could not achieve level 4 by 50, but this could have been achieved using a one-year access course, which is a common route for adults with no qualifications (Access to HE, 2012).

The pattern that Aldridge and Jenkins highlight seems to be well established for traditional-aged students. McGivney (2011) found that female learners outnumber male learners in most forms of post-compulsory education. Young women are also more likely to stay on in education after the age of 16, but McGivney highlights that women are more likely to have interruptions in their education, unlike men. She says that this is due to maternity, responsibility for children, as well as from stereotypical ideas of women as caregivers and homemakers, which results in low expectations from family and from their community. González-Arnal and Kilkey (2009) conducted a questionnaire survey in 2001 with full-time and part-time undergraduate students (n=431) and small-scale interviews with current or former humanities (n=24) undergraduates in 2004. They highlight that several of the female mature students in their research said that they waited until their children were old enough before going to university. This illustrates, to some degree, the pressure parents sometimes place on themselves to prioritise their children's needs over their own education. Hinton-Smith (2012, p. 43) also found that many of the lone mothers in her research mentioned that their participation as mature students was directly linked to their belief that they 'should have done this a long time ago'. Their reasons for delaying their participation in HE was because they lacked the support of parents, teachers or ex-partners.

In line with this, Schuller and Watson (2009) contend that the distribution of lifelong learning can be divided according to points in the adult life course:

1. Up to 25, which is based on the understanding that young people tend to mature beyond the traditional classification of age 21. They argue that most people have reached a point at which they can define themselves, independently of their parents, by the time



they are 25, which is often not evident at earlier ages. They also highlight that young people's engagement with education is now elongated in contrast with previous generations. This is partly because of the effect of the inflation of qualifications, as discussed later in this chapter (Dore, 1976). This means that many stay on in HE to gain the post-graduate qualifications they need in order to access the employment they desire. This is also because trajectories are very different within this group, with some young people taking very different paths before they turn 25 with positive alternatives such as apprenticeships, or negative alternatives such as prison, long-term unemployment or a 'repetition of dead-end jobs' (Schuller & Watson, 2009, p. 90).

2. 25-50, which is derived from the idea that many people focus on their careers and raising families, which influences their learning priorities. This period is illustrated as a time where time is constrained, with people feeling they do not have sufficient time for training alongside employment, or for family responsibilities alongside employment.
3. 50-75 the main feature of this stage is the transition to retirement, which they link to the idea of a third age, punctuated by engagement with employment, education and voluntary activities.
4. The 75+ is characterised as a growing, but diverse group in terms of their engagement with learning. They argue that although there is an appetite for disengagement within this age group, people within this age group are becoming more likely to want to continue to engage in new learning opportunities, because of increasing life-expectancy and delayed morbidity.

Whilst HE is not a key feature of Schuller and Watson's discussion across these groups, this attempt to divide the mature student group by more meaningful characteristics, highlights an important link between engagement in education and stages within an individual's life-course. These divisions also draw attention to the incompatibility of mature student lives and full-time undergraduate study for many people, particularly those in the 25-50 age group.

#### 2.4.1: Mature Students and HE Institutions

The choices mature students make, such as where and when they participate in HE, appears to be influenced by their social characteristics. This is important in understanding how experiences as undergraduates might be very different in comparison to traditional-aged students. Firstly, the availability of HE, in different geographical areas, can have an impact on adults' decisions to engage in HE. Secondly, their personal responsibilities also seem to influence their choices in terms of which HE institutions to participate in.

Tuckett and Burch (1995), writing well after the mass expansion of HE and before Dearing's report, maintained that learning opportunities for adults were certainly affected by their geographical location. This means that for some adults, access to HE is restricted: those living in rural areas or those who might have limited access to transport. Research such as that of Callender et al. (2014), Burton et al. (2011) and Elliot & Brna (2009) (discussed in more detail in Chapter 3: Adaptation) highlight that mature students welcome and respond well to being taught in their local area: whether HE in a FE college setting, in the case of Burton et al. and Elliot & Brna, or an Access to HE course in a community sure start centre, in the case of Callender et al. The proximity of HE, therefore, seems to be an essential part of mature student decision-making on participation.

González-Arnal and Kilkey (2009, p101), for example, found that students' choice of university was strongly influenced by their familial relationships. This was evident in the comments of one of their male participants, who highlighted that it was important for him to study HE locally, because he needed his family to support him with his caring responsibilities. Female mature students also often talked about their relationships with both children and partners restricting their options to studying in Hull, because they lived in the city. One female mature student explained that if she had been younger she might have looked for courses at other universities, but because she was now living with her partner she wanted to stay in that area (González-Arnal & Kilkey, 2009, p. 101). Elliot and Brna (2009) also found this, in their research with Higher National students in colleges in Fife, Scotland, in 2006/07. They revealed that students' ages seemed to have an impact on their decisions to apply to HE, which was highlighted in their questionnaire surveys (n=605), focus groups (n=91) and interviews (n=14). Mature students living with a partner, or children, or who were in full-time employment, were less likely to want to pursue degree level study. However, they established that they would reconsider their decision if local provision became available. As these studies were completed in different areas, at slightly different times, this provides compelling evidence that mature students with responsibilities are often restricted geographically.

Some of Reay's research (2004; Reay, et al., 2010) shows that for mature students, choices about where to study are often shaped by finding an environment where they feel comfortable, and this is also evident in Leathwood and Connell's (2003) questionnaire research (n=310). Whilst these findings will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3: Adaptation, it is important to highlight here that the HE environment seems to be an important element of mature students' choices to participate in HE, as well as geographical location. It is also necessary to consider the receptiveness of institutions to mature students, as some organisations, such as the OU and

Birkbeck University, have designed the structure of their teaching around mature students, rather than following the conventional teaching model found in most universities. For example, Birkbeck teach all their classes in the evenings. Whilst only London-based mature students have easy access to Birkbeck, the OU provide weekend classes and a flexible tutorial provision that, in theory, students can access from anywhere in the UK. This will be considered in more detail in the section on social mobility (1.5.2), later in this chapter: institutions' attitudes and positioning in respect of mature students must inevitably have an impact on students' choices on where to study.

#### 2.4.2: Mature Student Drop-out

As previously mentioned, a challenge for HE providers, policy-makers and indeed mature students themselves, is that the numbers of mature students who participate in HE and drop out remains consistently high. Because of this, institutions might see mature students as more of a risk than their traditional-age peers, and potential students might also see this as evidence that HE is too big a risk to take.

Mature students drop out at around twice the rate of younger learners (HESA, 2012). In 2012/13, whilst only 6% of traditional-aged students dropped out, mature students dropped out at a rate of 12%. Universities UK (2017) show the levels of First Year drop-out, each academic year, in Table 2.3 below:

Table 2.3: Drop-out percentages for mature and young students (Universities UK, 2017)

		2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
First degree	Young	7.2	6.3	5.7	5.7	6	6.2
	Mature	13.3	11.6	10.5	11.9	11.8	11.7
Young first degree by <a href="#">POLAR</a>	Q1	9.8	8.8	7.9	7.7	8.2	8.8

This demonstrates how consistent the drop-out rates have been for both young and mature students and how consistent the gap in rates is, regardless of the introduction of higher fees. The influence of socio-economic class also appears to have an effect on drop out, as young students from the most deprived area, indicated in the POLAR row, appear to drop-out somewhere between the figures for young and mature. This possibly reflects that there are more students from lower socio-economic groups, proportionately, in the mature student group than in the traditional-age student group.

However, McGivney (1996) contends that traditional definitions of drop-out do not work for mature students, because their pattern of persistence and drop-out can be very different to that of traditional-age students. She maintains that their learning is often interrupted by breaks in their education due to family commitments and employment. This has implications for institutions both in terms of how they accurately record drop-out, but also in terms of how they can adequately accommodate mature students, who need a more flexible provision. The barriers that affect students will be considered in more detail in Chapter 5: Barriers, to attempt to weigh up how much they influence mature students' experiences in HE.

## 2.5: Current Higher Education Policy: Challenges for Mature Students

In England, HE has often evolved as a result of government policy changes, or in response to changes in wider policy. The most recent developments in HE policy have been outlined in the White Paper: Success as a knowledge economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice (Her Majesty's Government, 2016). As implied in the title, this paper moves HE further towards increasing measurement, particularly in terms of outcomes. This has important connotations for mature students: firstly, it is important to consider if the economic precursor that runs throughout this document fits with mature students' needs; and secondly, if mature students' mission is to engage in HE to become socially mobile, we need to understand what support will be put in place to support their continued participation.

Therefore, this section will consider these issues, whilst also trying to decipher the differing purposes of HE. Whether the age of a student is important in terms of outcomes, for example, is at the heart of this discussion. Consequently, the rhetoric of recent HE policy will be considered in terms of the assumed benefits for individuals, communities and wider society and its effect on mature student participation and experiences in HE.

### 2.5.1: Economic Outcomes

The idea that HE should be intrinsically linked to individual economic outcomes is not a new one, but one which appears to have been developing over the last 100 years. Williams (2012, p. 15) maintains that despite the contradictions in debates about universities, there is agreement as to the purposes of HE:

'Student protesters, academics, politicians and commentators all appear to agree that HE is essential for employability and is therefore a prerequisite for social mobility and social justice. Such social and economic goals mean that education is far less likely, nowadays, to

be linked to a moral or intellectual vision of truth, enlightenment, knowledge or understanding.'

Williams discusses how the development of the idea of students gaining economic outcomes, which she links to Human Capital Theory, had roots as far back as the Robbins report (Committee on Higher Education, 1963). Three of the four aims of the report were directed at benefitting society and its citizens: 'to promote the general powers of the mind', 'the advancement of learning' and 'the transmission of a common culture and common standards of citizenship'. However, the first stated aim in this report relates to employment: 'instruction in skills suitable to play a part in the general division of labour'. Dore (1976) bemoans economists discovering education, which he believed has led to an instrumental view of education and a decline in the emphasis on learning for intellectual stimulation. He distinguished educational outcomes in two sets of qualities, and considers the benefits both sets have for wider society:

'curiosity and creativeness and productiveness and craftsmanship-qualities expressed in self-fulfilling activities – and, on the other hand, other 'instrumental' qualities which are equally dependent on intelligence, like cunning and the ability to be able to manipulate things and other people in order to acquire for oneself wealth or power or prestige' (Dore, 1976, p. 177).

Dore maintains that these instrumental qualities devalue stimulating and mind-expanding teaching in degrees, because young students have been encouraged to see university education as purely learning to earn throughout their schooling. Williams (2012) demonstrates how the employment focus then evolved in the Dearing report on HE (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997a) where three out of the four aims specifically related to employment and the economy. Nevertheless, the period between Dearing's reforms and 2002/3 is seen as a high water-mark in terms of commitment to lifelong learning. Although it may not be overly evident in the aims, the Dearing report does acknowledge the dual importance of HE, evident in one of the introductory statements:

'8. Higher education is fundamental to the social, economic and cultural health of the nation. It will contribute not only through the intellectual development of students and by equipping them for work, but also by adding to the world's store of knowledge and understanding, fostering culture for its own sake, and promoting the values that characterise higher education: respect for evidence; respect for individuals and their views; and the search for truth' (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997a, p. 9).

However, this acknowledgement of the value of education for the pursuit of knowledge appears to have been overshadowed by the economic goals in the report. Wolf (2002) like Dore (1976) laments this focus on the economic outcomes of HE. Wolf (2002, p. 255) believes that Dearing's report only 'offers a ritual obeisance to the notion that education "contributes to the whole

quality of life”’. Whilst it was a key part of the Dearing report, this change in focus seems to have muted the discussion of lifelong learning in HE policy, more recently. Gorard (2002) suggests that success rates in initial schooling are now much better than they were in the past, therefore, this has led to a marked decline in later learning provision. The focus Dearing gave to lifelong learning certainly appears to have gone by the wayside in the recent HE White Paper (2016), because it concentrates on employment outcomes for young students. This White Paper also extends this instrumental economic focus as it dominates the discussion, which both Dore (1967) and Wolf (2002) warned was a worrying trend in HE policy.

Undoubtedly, economic outcomes have become increasingly important for people as the need has risen for people to continue to be economically active past traditional ages of retirement. Indeed, the most recent HE White Paper (2016) neglects lifelong learning by failing to mention mature students, ignoring this important economic reality. McNair (2005) highlights that, early in this century, there were small numbers in cohorts entering the labour market and large numbers in cohorts who were retiring out of it. He maintains that this resulted in significant budgetary issues for the government, because there was less money collected from taxes and more demand from welfare for those entering retirement. Having since raised the age of retirement, the government and its policy-makers do not seem committed to later learning provision, both inside and outside of HE, to extend employment prospects to people throughout their working lives.

As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4: Motivation, mature students are not only influenced by potential economic rewards and career advancement, but also by non-career motivations. This is in keeping with Dore’s (1976; 1980) discussion of students benefitting from HE through genuine interest in a subject or for personal fulfilment, rather than for career and economic gains. Williams (2012) maintains that the view of students as consumers came well before the introduction of fees, with students increasingly seen as being involved in education purely for individual reasons, such as employment.

Students who are not motivated by economic and career outcomes may not find what they desire in HE, as the type and the design of undergraduate degree courses on offer may change because HE policy concentrates on career outcomes for students, rather than intellectual motives. Traditional core subjects such as Chemistry and Geography may be dropped in favour of subjects that appear to lend themselves to specific careers, such as Bio-Chemistry and Conservation. This might mean that studying for love of a subject could become much more difficult, because traditional courses become less available. This is particularly relevant for older

mature students, who may be less likely to pursue education for career goals (see Chapter 4: Motivation). However, in the government consultation document for the newly formed Office for Students (OfS), both Jo Johnson, Minister for HE, and the OfS Chair designate, Sir Michael Barber, maintain in their introductions that the love of learning, and search for truth, remain underlying values in HE. As OfS was created, as a direct result of the HE White Paper (2016), to be the single regulator of the HE sector in England, this offers promise that this value might be upheld in the future, despite being absent from the latest policy paper.

Therefore, as mature students have not been prioritised in the new report, this may have an impact on the number of mature students enrolling and the experiences of those that do enrol. As WP has played an important role in supporting mature students, it is important to consider what role WP departments may have in mediating the effects of this.

### 2.5.2: Social Mobility

WP initiatives have certainly made a difference to the participation of low participation groups, including mature students, to try to improve social mobility in the UK. The work of OFFA has been particularly helpful, for example; the gains that have been made because of the introduction of access agreements were called “a national success story” by Ebdon (Times Higher Education, 2018). Despite these gains, it is evident that attitudes to WP vary across HE institutions. In addition, although mature students were classed as WP students in both Robbins’ and Dearing’s reports, they seem to have been taken out of the focus of more recent WP guidance. The 2016 White Paper certainly gives some consideration to WP in England, but the groups this refers to appears to be open to interpretation. This section will consider how universities respond to HE policy in respect of WP and look at how the WP focus appears to have moved away from mature students.

As the policy guidance on WP tends to be vague, this leaves HE providers to interpret this themselves, which has led to very different approaches to WP across the HE sector in the UK. However, WP recruitment has varied across providers in HE. For mature students another challenge was presented with recent government policy failing to classify them as WP, which might make it more challenging for them to participate. Also, as some of the elite HE providers appear to limit their intake of WP students more generally (Graham, 2013), their attitudes to mature student recruitment might deteriorate because there is no requirement to include them. The different perceptions of who is WP, across HE providers, and their differing attitudes to WP in general will be discussed in this section.

The pressure on universities to compete also appears to create issues for providers in their WP focus in general, not just in respect of mature students. Whitty (1997) highlights concern that placing market relations above equity through HE policy, might serve to perpetuate unequal access for all non-traditional students. Drawing from these ideas, Bowl & Hughes (2014) examined access agreements and other publicly available documents (prospectuses, web-based publicity and Widening Participation policy statements) from eight English universities, to see how they conformed to policy guidelines and whether there was a variation in the way they approached WP. They found that some elite universities seemed to be avoiding or paying lip service to WP. The low levels of recruitment of WP students in the elite Russell Group universities was justified in their access agreement by only comparing themselves to similar institutions, rather than making comparisons with the whole HE sector. This is illustrated in this extract from a university's access agreement:

'Self-assessment is underpinned by a firm belief that our performance should be placed against that of those institutions most similar to us in the Russell Group. Comparison against the sector as a whole underplays both the success we have achieved and, crucially, the clear commitment we have to fair access and Widening Participation' (Bowl & Hughes, 2014, p. 297).

Similar findings are contained in Graham's (2013) review of the prospectus documents of six universities in 2007 and again in 2011. She found that in 2007, Russell group universities were much less likely than post-1992 universities to include inclusive comments in prospectuses or provide information about financial support. However, Graham found that this changed in the 2011 documents, where Russell group universities now included some comments about inclusivity and financial support, whereas the post-1992 institution had removed some of theirs. She contends that many universities have begun to move to a middle ground in their attitudes to WP. Les Ebdon, former director of the Office of Fair Access to Higher Education (OFFA) tried to address this by making it a condition for universities that charge £9,000 fees to have their access agreements approved by OFFA, to ensure they committed to WP. Ebdon said that this strategy "exceeded my expectations," (Times Higher Education, 2018) with admissions to English universities changing substantially since he took the role with OFFA. For example, Else (Times Higher Education, 2018) illustrates that there has been a 73% increase in 18-year-olds participating in HE from the most disadvantaged areas, in the last 10 years, with universities spending over £800,000,000 to try to increase the number of students enrolling from disadvantaged backgrounds. Whilst Ebdon does not comment on full-time mature students, he laments the effect higher fees have had on part-time mature students, though he also indicates



that other factors have also fed into declining enrolments (e.g. more young students going to university (Gorard, 2002), the poor economic climate (Kearns, 2014)).

But the variation in attitudes across universities is recognised. Bowl & Hughes also highlight that the marketing and mission statements for the elite Russell Group universities only mentioned inclusivity in relation to welcoming students from state schools rather than from non-traditional groups. They also highlight that their publicly available documents had few statements about inclusion, accessibility, diversity and widening access for under-represented groups. For the post-1992 universities, it was felt that they struggled with the balance between their market position and providing equal access, evidenced in them downplaying access and inclusion possibly so that they could justify higher fees. In contrast both recruitment and promotion of WP appeared to be unhindered in the Guild Group (vocational specialist universities) who were much more likely to mention their WP performance in both access agreements and in publically available documents (Bowl & Hughes, 2014).

In terms of mature student recruitment, Graham suggests that although the elite institutions were more inclusive in their approach in the 2011 prospectus document, they attached conditions to their recruitment. One of the universities, for example, welcomed mature students, but in the context of their ability to fit in with school leavers: 'The university welcomes mature students who want to commit to a full-time course with the same demands, opportunities and facilities that our school-leaving students experience (University of Oldmore 2011, 26)' (Graham, 2013, p. 84). She argues that this approach results in excluding mature students because it implies that they are a minority that need to be willing to change to be accommodated. This suggests that some universities continue to take a one-size-fits-all approach.

But both Graham's (2013) and Bowl and Hughes' (2014) reviews were narrow in their scope. Bowl and Hughes only look at eight universities in a single English region, so findings may be restricted to this region. Graham's (2013) research considers six universities across three English regions, which might offer a more representative picture. However, because they were selected through opportunity sampling for geographical convenience, this might limit its findings, again because location was restricted. A stronger picture of university responses to market-led policy is found when these studies are used together. The similarities in some of their findings, discussed above, suggest that institutions can have very different attitudes to WP in general. So, although there have been positive outcomes because of the demands from OFFA, WP certainly seems to be approached differently, across English universities. Graham's (2013) observations

of attitudes to mature students also demonstrates differences in how universities approach the groups that come under the WP scope. Whilst there is significant variation in how WP is perceived by universities, there is also variation in who they see as WP students. This inevitably reflects changing government policy priorities for HE, as which students are classed as WP and how the ideas of who qualifies as WP has certainly evolved.

Smith (2008) maintains that all mature students are treated as WP students within HE, although only some have no previous HE qualifications, or are from low participation areas. She claims that this is because it can be difficult to discern this information, so it is difficult to measure their social mobility, as a group. Possibly as a result of this, some documents specify mature students as a WP group, alongside other under-represented groups (Aimhigher Research and Consultancy Network, 2013; Department for Education, 2017), but others fail to mention them (Her Majesty's Government, 2016). For example, much of the discussion of WP in the 2016 White Paper appears to be specifically directed at students from disadvantaged backgrounds, evident from this statement: *'protect accountability for fair access and Widening Participation...for students from disadvantaged backgrounds alongside choice and competition'* (Her Majesty's Government, 2016, pp. 15-16). As this fails to underline the value of adult learning, so the way in which institutions will respond to this might be an issue for concern.

Ebdon felt, during his time at OFFA, that mature students were not often represented in access agreements when they should have been. He contends that action is being taken to tackle this, however: "More and more we're challenging universities to tell us what they're doing" (cited in Hall, 2017). Sir Michael Barber, Chair of OfS, demonstrates in the questions asked in their recent consultation (Department for Education, 2017) that mature students are still being classed as WP, despite OFFA being dissolved and merged with the HE Funding Council for England (HEFCE), forming the OfS. HESA also use detailed definitions to discuss Widening Participation in HE, which includes data on mature students.

But Ebdon's concern about mature students slipping from WP agendas in HE institutions (Hall, 2017) is certainly illustrated in the Aimhigher (2013) review of WP research. The review highlights that, although mature students were classed as WP by OFFA, university outreach activities have concentrated on schools, so outreach activities for mature students have been limited. It suggests that HE institutions struggle to conceptualise outreach for mature students, and as a result have difficulty delivering outreach to them: *'Local knowledge and good links with employers, FE colleges and community groups are essential for targeting mature students, but evidence of successfully implemented outreach strategies for this group is scarce in the research*

(Aimhigher Research and Consultancy Network, 2013, p. 12). Therefore, it is difficult to assess the gains from WP in respect of mature students, because of a lack of information on WP successes and failures in this regard. This review also highlights that mature students tend to receive less information and guidance. This is also acknowledged in Bristol University's research (Bennun, 2015) on their mature students, where the UCAS application process was seen to be something designed for 18-year olds in school. This was reflected in students' comments, as they felt there was no application guidance given for people who did not have recent A-levels and were not in full-time education (Bennun, 2015). McVitty and Morris (2012) also acknowledge that the lack of outreach given to mature students may affect their retention in HE. They found that mature students who received advice and guidance, before entering HE, were less likely to drop out. In keeping with this, Callender (NCIHE, 1997) found, in her research for Dearing's report, that many mature students did not believe that adequate thought was given to them (47% of students aged 25+ and 36% of students aged 21-24).

The Robbins principle, that everyone with the ability and the desire to study in HE should have access, is still evident in HE policy, though general policy changes to WP, since the Dearing report, appear to have continually detracted attention from mature learners towards young learners from lower socio-economic groups (Smith, 2008; Her Majesty's Government, 2011). This means that it has become much harder for some mature students to participate. The 'Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers' social mobility strategy, under the coalition UK government (2010-15), is a good example of this, focussing on better chances for children within education, rather than second chances for adults: *'ensuring that everyone has a fair chance to get a better job than their parents'* (Her Majesty's Government, 2011). Nevertheless, The Department for Business Innovation and Skills, in the year after the launch of the Opening Doors strategy, stated that they were committed to widen participation in HE to everyone able to study at that level (BIS, 2012). This continued to be the message from HEFCE who stated: 'Our aim is to promote and provide the opportunity of successful participation in higher education to everyone who can benefit from it. This is vital for social mobility and economic competitiveness' (HEFCE, 2016). But again, the vagueness of these promises causes difficulties when educational providers decide who to focus WP funds on. This suggestion that mature students are less important in terms of WP than younger students continues to be communicated by their omission in recent WP policy documents (Her Majesty's Government, 2016). Whilst Robbins and Dearing were clear in their reports about mature students' role in WP, this lack of mention of them in recent policy sets a bleak picture for future participation and retention.

The advised WP approach in the 2016 White Paper appears to be to carry on with what you have been doing, but this is problematic, because institutions interpret WP very differently. The term 'young' is used frequently in this document, presenting problems for mature students. For example, the only specific WP groups discussed are those from BME groups and males from lower socio-economic groups. In this discussion it appears that young students are the target, as in the discussion of the improved number of 18 years olds entering HE from BME backgrounds, and 'young white males' (Her Majesty's Government, 2016, p. 55). Ethnic minority students, students with disabilities and disadvantaged backgrounds are all mentioned, though 'mature', or 'age' is notably absent. So whilst HE policy is aligning itself to cope with the challenges of students' employment needs and the skills gap, students over 21 do not appear to be important, having failed to have made the discussions of WP in the 2016 White Paper. Whether this is because mature students are not seen as a priority, or because it is assumed that universities will continue to support them without prompting, remains to be seen.

## Conclusions

Whilst mature students have proved to be an important group in terms of expanding HE and in terms of increasing participation of low-participation groups, the way HE policy has evolved has presented difficulties for them. Whilst access for non-traditional young students has been ring-fenced by recent policy, issues relating to funding study coupled with the erosion of part-time undergraduate provision means that it is arguably more difficult for mature students to participate. This may become a much bigger concern with people living longer lives, in much better health than previous generations, as older people may increasingly look to HE as an outlet to extend their working lives and meet their employment needs and desire for life satisfaction. Whilst this chapter has provided an overview of the experiences of mature students in HE more generally, it is now essential to look at their experiences within HE institutions, in detail, to understand how their age might affect them whilst studying full-time.

# Chapter 3: Mature Students' Adaptation

## Introduction

'The knower becomes a knower by exploration and interaction, the particulars or the data are experienced in the push and pull of living as we relate to our physical, social and conceptual environment' (Gill, 1993, p. 49).

As Gill highlights above, adaptation is a process of understanding something new or unfamiliar, which could be an object, a new environment, or a new skill. Adaptation occurs throughout our lives; therefore, any new situation presents opportunities and challenges, regardless of your age.

At university, many undergraduate students struggle to adapt to the demands, particularly when they first start their degree. For many students these problems subside, as they quickly adapt to the learning environment and become familiar with peers and the wider student community. However, not all students find the transition easy: students' backgrounds can hinder their adaptation, both academically and socially, in HE. Mature students may struggle more in adapting than their younger peers, because their backgrounds are often more complex because of personal responsibilities and the point at which they are at in the life-course (Schuller & Watson, 2009). They also may be affected by being such a small group in HE (HESA, 2016) as educational programmes are likely to be designed around the majority of participants who are traditional-age students (McGivney, 1990), but also because educational stages seem tied to specific ages in the UK (NUS, 2013). The reduction in part-time undergraduate courses could be seen as further evidence of this, as discussed in the last chapter, as mature students that are forced into negotiating full-time undergraduate study might find it much harder to fit their studies around a complex set of external responsibilities.

Gaps or breaks in a student's experience of formal and post-secondary education, poor experiences at school and the financial risks taken might make adaptation particularly difficult for mature students (Chapman, 2017). In addition, coping with negative attitudes, alongside layers of personal responsibilities, may complicate the process of adaptation further for mature students. It may also be the case that the older a student is, the harder it may be to fully adapt to the demands of this new educational environment, because of attitudes and life-course factors (Schuller & Watson, 2009). However, older students tend to bring a wealth of life experience which can help them to adapt to some of the academic aspects of university life, which might help them to persist through some of the challenges, during their studies.

This chapter will begin by considering the process of adaptation in education. Subsequently, discussion will turn to research that looks at issues relating to age and academic adaptation, including students' performance and their learner identities. The discussion will then examine mature students' experiences in relation to their social adaptation, which includes relations with peers and educators as well as the HE environment in general. Finally, there will be a consideration of how age might relate to students' persistence in HE studies, in the light of the differences in drop-out levels of mature students and traditional-age students, as previously discussed.

### 3.1: Adaptation in Education

Piaget's process of adaptation (Piaget, 1936, p. 4) is useful in understanding the process that students might go through on an undergraduate degree. He believed that new information and experiences were taken in through a person's senses and processed to help them successfully adapt to situations. This information is used to construct mental structures, which he refers to as 'Schemata' (Piaget, 1936) which are formed from this new information and repeated experiences of this situation. For a child, their first time in a classroom might be the new information that forms the basis of an education schema. For an adult, of any age, this schema might then be adapted for their first experience in a lecture at university. Developing or adapting a schema helps individuals to cope with the expectations and demands in different environments and situations. Although Piaget's work is often more generally associated with the cognitive development of children, Sutherland (1999) argues that adults use similar adaptation techniques to consolidate new experiences, in the same way that children do. He maintains that whilst children often experience intellect-stimulating events and adults tend to experience trauma-inducing events when they have to adapt, they both assimilate or accommodate new experiences in the same way, to satisfy a need to understand (equilibrium). Gill (1993) extends this, using Dewey's (1938) theory on experiential learning, arguing that real learning only takes place when the learner is positively altered by these new experiences: both in terms of their current contexts and in helping them to alter future experiences and contexts because of this new information. The other aspect of Dewey's experiential learning that is relevant, in terms of adaptation, is his observations on the social aspect of the adaptation process. He contends:

Experience does not occur in a vacuum. There are sources outside an individual which give rise to experience. It is constantly fed from these springs (Dewey, 1938, p. 40).

This means that many elements are at play when students are adapting to new knowledge: the environment in which this experience is delivered, the people involved in the delivery of this knowledge, as well as the language used in its delivery. Therefore, whilst students must adapt

intellectually, in order to meet the academic demands of HE, it is also important that they adapt socially, to some degree.

Gill (1993) draws parallels between learning and dancing, which brings Piaget's and Dewey's ideas together into a more visual representation of trial, error and mastery in education. He contends that the 'knower', or learner, needs to experience and get to know the knowledge they are seeking, with the learner and knowledge being two separate entities that need to interact for each to influence the other. He highlights that to gain the most from knowledge the learner needs to form a relationship with it, in the same way as humans form relationships with family members and friends or, to use his analogy, dance partners. Gill's concept of fluidity between the learner's engagement with knowledge and their subsequent contribution towards knowledge, is idealised, however. Theoretically the concept shows a perfect example of the pursuit of knowledge, but in practice there are many external factors that can complicate this process of adaptation in education. Indeed, Gill acknowledges that as well as intellectual factors, language and other social factors are also a key part of the process of adaptation:

Language is as fundamental to our intellectual life, no matter how broadly or narrowly conceived, as breathing is to our physical life (Gill, 1993, p. 61).

There are a few elements of this theory that seem pertinent for a comparison between mature students' adaptation and traditional students' adaptation.

Firstly, Gill contends that effective dialogue leads to effective learning, and it seems likely that, because mature students are more likely to have had experience of dialogue through their experiences of discussion and debate in employment, they might be more confident at engaging with knowledge and academics at university (Robotham, 2012). In contrast, as school leavers are often conditioned in terms of hierarchy in education as subordinates to teachers, a key issue in Dewey's (1938) criticism of traditional education, this might make it more difficult for traditional-age students to adapt to a form of education where they need to engage in dialogue. Secondly, both Gill (1993) and Rogers (1983), ten years before him, acknowledge that universities are not known for actively trying to teach students in this active and engaging form. This is likely to have more consequences for younger students, who are used to having their energy channelled through instruction: the lack of clear instruction and need for independent study are therefore likely to be more alien to traditional-age students than for mature students who should be more used to organising their own time around work-based activities. Finally, there are important external factors involved in the delivery and description of this knowledge (facial expressions, physical postures of the educators delivering this knowledge), again

acknowledged by Gill (1993), that might detrimentally affect the adaptation of mature students, and young students from low-participation groups.

This social part of the learning environment can raise students' concerns about their difference to academics, which may often relate to issues of class and ethnicity (Furlong & Cartmel, 2009; Reay, et al., 2010). Of course, social class is also important here, as it was previously noted that the composition of mature students is more likely to include a higher proportion of individuals from areas of deprivation (Access to HE, 2012). Much of the large body of research on working-class students in compulsory education is consequently also relevant to many mature students, such as Bernstein's (1971) observations that working class children were disadvantaged by their restrictive use of language, because educators interpreted this as lack of ability and the students themselves felt the use of elaborate language, in education, made them feel deficient. Therefore, the attitude of academics delivering learning, as well as the composition of the student body in different institutions can play an important part in undermining the adaptation ability of mature, ethnic minority or working-class students. As will be discussed later in this chapter, students' learning identity and their sense of fit in HE can be hampered by their social class (Reay, 2004; Bourdieu, 1984; Chapman, 2017)

As previously mentioned, for many students the schema for university will have been developed at school, or college, so new information will be added to help them adapt to the new demands at university. In contrast, adapting to independent living, or independent study, might be a big challenge for those away from their parents, or school, for the first time. Conversely, as mature students may have been out of education for some time, or may have been educated very differently, they might need to develop a completely new education schema or make significant changes to an existing schema they haven't used for a long time, to adapt to the academic demands at university. On the positive side, their experiences in employment may have prepared them well for the independent learning required for an undergraduate degree (Robotham, 2012).

There are two types of adaptation that appear to be relevant in education. Academic adaptation seems to be the most important, as students' continuing studies and the completion of their studies relies on their performance. However, social adaptation can also be seen to be equally important, as highlighted in Dewey's (1938) ideas about learning as a social process: social networks can be essential in supporting a student during their studies. As universities are often designed around the needs of traditional-age students (McGivney, 1990), it might be much easier for them to gain effective social networks than it is for mature students, both in terms of



supporting their studies and as part of maturing and learning to live independently. Building effective social networks at university may be more problematic for mature students: Firstly, mature students can find it more difficult to socialise with traditional-age students, due to age and social class difference (Reay, 2004) or often because they are in a different stage of life (Meehan & Negy, 2003), having already learned to live independently. Secondly, mature students' ability to socialise at university can be complicated by their backgrounds, such as practical barriers that emerge from caring (Mannay & Morgan, 2013) or financial responsibilities (Dennis, et al., 2018), which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5). Finally, mature students, who often commute rather than move into university accommodation, will have existing networks outside of their university life to potentially support them emotionally. However, if they are unable or unwilling to form a social network within university this can be disadvantageous: their adaptation in the learning environment, for example, might be complicated due to being unfamiliar with their peers. Both of these issues depend on the type of university that mature students choose to attend as some universities are notably more mature-friendly than others (Graham, 2013; Bowl & Hughes, 2014), which might have a more positive affect on social adaptation.

The structure of education is also important here, because it can often be designed to meet the needs of traditional-age students, who are generally the majority group (HESA, 2016). The delivery of a one-size-fits-all experience in HE (McGivney, 1990) can make it more difficult for mature students to adapt. Institutions can, indirectly, make it more difficult for these students to adapt by focussing activities around traditional students, which can alienate older students (Crozier, et al., 2008). Regardless of age, some students might argue that they never fully adapt to the university environment. However younger students may find it easier than mature students, because they are more familiar with the system and routine of education. Students' perceptions of themselves as learners might also be very different, depending on their age and background characteristics, leading some to assume that they cannot easily adapt academically (Chapman, 2017) or socially (Christie, et al., 2008) at university.

Therefore, there are many factors that feed into this process of adaptation that need to be discussed in more detail, including the issues discussed above. In theory, academic, or intellectual, adaptation is likely to be the main priority for students pursuing an undergraduate degree, regardless of their age. Therefore, it is important to understand whether there are differences in intellectual adaptation between mature and traditional-age students. Whilst academic adaptation might be seen on the surface as more important, it is also essential to consider the social elements of adaptation at university, both in students' learning environments

(Dewey, 1938; Gill, 1993) and also within their wider experiences of life at university (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Christie, 2009).

## 3.2: Academic Adaptation

It is difficult to determine what data can be used as an effective measure of academic adaptation. Some research follows the tradition of using results as a yardstick to measure performance (McVitty & Morris, 2012; Richardson & Woodley, 2003), although, as will be discussed, this may not be a useful measure as it neglects the very different starting points and very different perceptions of educational growth (Dewey, 1938; Gill, 1993). In contrast, whilst small-scale research does not have the gravitas that large-scale data has in terms of representativeness, it can illustrate students' lived experiences of the negotiation of different elements of university life, to help us understand differences in the adaptation of mature and traditional-age students.

Consequently, this section will open by looking at research on age and performance, to see if there is any basis for different intellectual abilities, and then it will turn to consider learning identities and the impact of the HE environment on academic adaptation for mature and traditional-age students.

### 3.2.1: Performance

Performance can be seen to be important in understanding intellectual adaptation in HE. Students who adapt well to the challenges of the HE environment, might perform better than those who do not. There are two key issues in relation to performance here: Firstly, adapting to academic demands and secondly, adapting to life at university, which could be seen to contribute to students' successful negotiation of academic demands.

There is little evidence to support the idea that academic adaptation changes with age. Research on national performance patterns by students' age provides conflicting accounts. McVitty and Morris (2012) obtained HESA data to consider performance for all first-degree mature students in the UK who graduated in the 2009/10 academic year (n=350,850). They were slightly more likely (13.6%) than traditional-age students (13.2%) to graduate with a first-class degree (see Table 3.1). However, it was also evident that mature students in this cohort were much less likely to obtain an upper second-class degree than traditional-age students and more likely to graduate with a third-class or an unclassified degree.

Table 3.1: Degree Classifications of Young and Mature students graduating in 2009/10 (McVitty & Morris, 2012, p. 12)

	Young		Mature		Total	
First-class honours	32,860	13.2	13,965	13.6	46,825	13.3
Upper second-class honours	120,135	48.4	36,810	35.9	156,945	44.7
Lower second-class honours	68,205	27.5	28,760	28.1	96,965	27.6
Third class honours/ Pass	14,615	5.9	9,835	9.6	24,455	7.0
Unclassified	12,565	5.1	12,975	12.7	25,540	7.3
Classification n/a	35	0	85	0.1	120	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>248,415</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>102,435</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>350,850</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Richardson and Woodley (2003) also examined attainment for undergraduates across the UK, who gained their first degree in 1995-96 (n= 228,790). Contrary to McVitty and Morris' findings, they found that mature students, in general, gained similar outcomes to traditional-age students in degree classifications. As they observed differences across age groups, rather than just comparing the traditional-age group and the mature student group, they were able to differentiate attainment. Although these differences were not substantial, traditional-aged students (62.7%) and those aged 31-40 (60.3%) were slightly more likely to gain first-class or upper second-class honours than those aged 21-24 (53.7%) and those aged 51-60 (42.2%). The decline in attainment level after the age 50 became much more notable after the age of 60, suggesting that academic adaptation might actually be more difficult for older mature students. This might explain why, as previously discussed, many in these age groups choose not to participate in HE (Field, 2006; White, 2012). Whilst McVitty and Morris' (2012) analysis is more simplistic, comparisons between these studies suggest that the performance of mature students has declined since the cohort examined by Richardson and Woodley (2003). However, it is also possible that there may be general differences in the students within these cohorts, as attainment will also be influenced by many other factors, such as who might participate, which is effected by policy changes, such as the hike in university fees (Callender & Thompson, 2018).

Changes to the funding of HE might explain the changes in this time frame, as mature students in the 1995/96 cohort would have been entitled to grants and would not have had to pay fees, unlike the 2009/10 cohort who would have been under the current funding structure with fees at around £3000 per year. As a result, mature students may have been more likely to have to engage in paid employment, whilst studying, which may have affected their academic

adaptation. McVitty and Morris assume barriers may be responsible for this, based on their survey findings with mature students in this cohort (n=3,963). They found that, of those who were studying full-time (n=2482), 9.7% students worked full-time, whilst 43.2% said they worked part-time alongside their studies. However, as a similar analysis was not conducted with the traditional-age students, this does not provide a clear explanation of the difference. A lack of recent comparable research also makes it difficult to re-enforce these findings.

In theory, younger students have recently left the school environment, so they should be more familiar with academic routines and demands and may, therefore, adapt and perform better than mature students. This may explain McVitty and Morris' (2012) findings, but this seems unlikely as it is not apparent in Richardson and Woodley's (2003) analysis. This theory is also challenged, somewhat, by Christie's (2009) research on the transitions of non-traditional young students (n=12) in two pre-1992 universities in Scotland. These young non-traditional students cited similar difficulties to mature students in terms of difficulties coping with academic demands. They argued that they worked harder and were more committed to study than their traditional, more affluent peers. However, they found that their employment responsibilities made it more difficult for them to cope with the demands of study (Christie, 2009).

It could also be argued that mature students might actually find it easier to adapt to academic demands because of their experiences in the workplace. Dennis et al.'s (2018) research with undergraduates, at Aberdeen University (n=1652), found that students who participated in skilled employment during term-time actually gained better grades than students who did not engage in paid employment, or those employed in term-time low-skilled employment. This suggests that experience of skilled employment might be of benefit to mature students who engage in HE and give them an advantage, though socio-economic class is obviously pertinent in this respect. However, performing to the expected standard might be more difficult for the mature students and for the non-traditional students who have to engage in unskilled employment. This will also be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

Gill (1993) argues that students' own perception of their achievement is the only valid measure of success in education. He contends that whilst individual students are open to feedback from other sources, it is often the students' own assessment of whether their experience has met their needs that matters. As Dewey (1938) highlights, the idea of growth means nothing unless we know the direction that growth takes. For example, for a traditional-age student, progressing from school through university after achieving average grade A-levels, an upper-second class degree might reflect suitable growth (if we are to accept league tables as a measure). Growth

could also be multi-faceted: for example, a similar traditional-age student might deem growth as whether they were able to secure appropriate employment after leaving their course with their 2:1 grade (if we are to accept the economic outcome measures in HE policy). This is particularly relevant for mature students, as their starting points are often very different in comparison with traditional-age students: some come directly into HE after a prolonged period in employment with no A-level equivalent qualifications. Therefore, a degree in itself, regardless of the grade, might be perceived as an appropriate level of growth.

Whilst Richardson and Woodley (2003) did not look specifically at adaptation they point to performance problems arising from variations in academic practices, as well as from the different demographic characteristics of students. They vaguely hint at institutional issues, or issues relating to certain subjects, as well as external barriers, though these are not made specific. Meehan & Negy's (2003) survey research also suggests that responsibility barriers affect successful adaptation and performance. They found that being married acted as a barrier to academic adaptation at university for some students. Their research assessed students' perceptions of how well they were adapting to the college experience and the associated demands. Of the responding students, who were from a single American university, 79 were married (63 female/16 male) and 192 were unmarried (132 female/60 male). Whilst they do not look specifically at degree outcomes and grades, they highlighted that being married, in general, had a negative impact on adjustment to college life, which they suspected would also impact on performance. Meehan & Negy (2003) put difficulties adapting down to domestic and caring responsibilities taking priority, with academic demands coming second. Interestingly, whilst social support from friends and family had a positive impact on adjustment for all students, regardless of their marital status, social support from spouses showed no significant correlation with married students' adjustment to college life. However, despite their suspicions, whilst the married students were less likely to integrate socially, the perceived motivation, application, and performance was no different between married and unmarried students. This suggests that adaptation, certainly in social terms, may not actually be important for undergraduates in helping them perform well.

### 3.2.2: Learner Identities

Students' accounts of adaptation are highlighted in the research discussed in this section, where it is evident that mature student adaptation can be much harder, because of their previous negative experiences of schooling.

The Imposter Phenomenon (Clance & Imes, 1978), which is often referred to as Imposter Syndrome, is also something that often affects non-traditional students. Mature students experience these feelings, as some perceive themselves as deviants in HE (Gorard, 2002), because they failed to participate at a traditional age. The Imposter Phenomenon (Clance & Imes, 1978, p. 242) is described as: 'generalized anxiety, lack of self-confidence, depression, and frustration related to inability to meet self-imposed standards of achievement.' Clance and Imes (1978), who first described the phenomenon, related this concept to their research of successful women, who were university students, academics and professional working women in the US. They found that females tended to put their achievements or selection down to luck or a mistake, which had not been realised by anyone else. This resulted in them feeling like they were intellectual imposters, anxious that they would be found out as phoney. This can be a barrier to gaining a sense of belonging and consequently a barrier to in-depth adaptation. Clance and Imes (1978) argue that women are more likely to experience this than men; however, other research suggests that this is also likely to be experienced by all minority groups in a given environment.

Chapman (2017) found that Imposter Syndrome was at its worst for all of the eight mature students in her research, during the early part of their First year in HE. In interviews she found that this was particularly apparent in relation to formal assessments, with students unsure about how to complete these assessments. But she maintains that some of the feelings of Imposter Syndrome can be overcome by positive feedback in assessments, because this validates their reasons for studying and thereby helps them to develop a sense of belonging. However, whilst there is research on the existence of Imposter Syndrome, Chapman appears to be the only researcher who has examined it in a group of undergraduates in a university in the UK. Some transition research lends itself to the idea of Imposter Syndrome in young non-traditional students, however. One example of this is in Christie et al.'s (2008) research with 29 non-traditional students (including mature students) in their first year in an elite university in Scotland. They found that some of these students described a loss of their learning identity in their transition from FE to HE, because their knowledge about how the learning system worked and the academic standard of work expected of them was no longer relevant. They argue that this resulted in an emotional insecurity that resulted in a roller-coaster experience during their first-year studies, where they dipped in and out of self-doubt as well as motivations such as enjoyment. By the end of their First Year, Christie et al. highlight that they had begun to form a new view of themselves as competent learners, helped by academic achievements and 'got something 'right'' (Christie, et al., 2008, p. 574). This aligns with Chapman's (2017) findings on assessments, suggesting that the adaptation process helps

students to eventually master the academic demands and subsequently feel a sense of fit. However, research which provides a comparison between traditional and non-traditional student experience is lacking in this respect. Therefore, further research on adaptation would help to build a better picture of whether fitting into university life is different for mature and non-traditional students in comparison to traditional students.

Crozier et al. (2008) also highlight in their research that not only negative experiences, but the gap in education also makes it harder for mature students to initially adapt to assessments. Whilst mature students seem to have successfully adapted to the demands at the end of their degree, it appears that the adaptation process is most difficult at the start of their studies in HE. Indeed, this is evident not only in the experiences of mature students, but also for young non-traditional students (Christie, 2009). The concept of 'Habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977) gives a good outline of how individuals can adapt differently within structures, which to some degree explains how factors such as age or social class can make adaption difficult, if students do not have the same background characteristics as the majority group. As will be discussed later in this chapter, some of Reay's work highlights how an individual's class and age influence choice of institution (Reay, 2004). Though in respect of habitus, she found that working-class mature students were largely unable to absorb their student identity at elite universities, and described their student identities as 'relatively fragile and unconfident' (Reay, et al., 2010, p. 115). It was, however, acknowledged that these institutions had reduced their support, due to financial reasons, and this had also contributed to the students' lack of belonging and integration. In respect of mature students, Reay (2004) also found in her previous research with mature students that they struggle with their own authenticity in education, which derives from a sense of educational failure, based on their earlier experiences during schooling.

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social and cultural capital is also relevant in respect of mature students. This is because the gap in their education), may mean that with a less tangible connection to peers and educators than traditional-age students might have. The fact that mature students are more likely to be working-class than traditional-age students is also relevant. Whether social capital is important in the context of performance in HE is considered in Meehan and Negy's (2003) questionnaire research with 271 students in a public university in America. Although they found that married students (n=79) were less likely to integrate socially and develop an institutional attachment, this did not appear to have any effect on their academic adjustment or personal/emotional adjustment, as there were no differences in the scores of married and unmarried students. But the type of institution can also be important in assessing whether social adaptation influences students' performance and their contentment at

university. Reay et al. (2009) found that non-traditional students at more elite universities let themselves be absorbed into university life, trying to assimilate with their peers, despite continuing to feel different to them. Those at post-1992 and FE settings, in comparison, were seen to be restricted in terms of their adaptation by situational factors, such as living at home, working part-time or other commitments. This is also acknowledged by Meehan and Negy (2003) who explain that the married students had restricted time to engage with extra-curricular activities because of their responsibilities. However, they highlight that they were able to focus their efforts on academic adaptation, because of their lack of investment in social adaptation.

In contrast Reay et al. (2010) contend that students who were restricted by their responsibilities seemed less committed to integrating or unable to absorb their student identity, which was described as 'relatively fragile and unconfident' (Reay, et al., 2010, p. 115) and this was also evident in Crozier et al.'s (2008) research. Lehmann (2014) also found that Canadian working-class students felt they had to abandon their class identity at university, in order to be successful, which meant distancing themselves from old friends. This also echoes findings from Reay's earlier research (2004) where working class students felt that in order to realise their academic abilities, in university, they had to lose an important part of their class identity. Christie (2009) also found similar feelings amongst the young non-traditional students in her research, whom she maintains accepted a middle-class frame for their views on going to university. However, they appeared to take a more positive approach, moving away from working-class values and adopting middle-class values, unlike the mature students in Reay's (2009) research. They argued that they needed to go to a pre-1992 university, rather than settling for a degree from a post-1992 HE institution, so that they could leave with a top-quality degree for it to be worth the risks of university study. Also, unlike the mature students in Reay's research, they socialised with their traditional-age peers at university, rather than choosing a university where they would study with students 'like them': they actively did the opposite, choosing a university with high grade standards amongst swathes of middle-class peers. Although social adaptation was more difficult because they were living at home and had employment commitments, in the same way as mature students, it still formed an important part of their adaptation experience at university (Christie, 2009). Consequently, social adaptation plays an important role in the formation of student identity for some students. The differences found in this cross-section of research suggests that mature students might be looking for different kinds of social networks to younger students, even those traditional-age students who feel they are on the social fringes because they are non-traditional students.



Sutherland (1999) acknowledges that, for adults, the process of adapting can be complicated by other factors, such as age, class or personal responsibilities, which make full adaptation difficult. For example, some of the barriers discussed in the last chapter, such as responsibility conflicts (Tones, et al., 2009; Gonzáles-Arnal & Kilkey, 2009), may present significant challenges to building what Piaget would view as a schema for education, which should aid their adaptation. Social roles can compete with the formation of a student identity, as Rogers (2003) highlights in his critique of adult learning and teaching. He suggests that the aim of education is to give students independence, but teaching staff often take the role of the adult, expecting students to take the role of child. This can be problematic for all students, but particularly for mature students. He contends that adult learners struggle when they try to fit into the student role because they cannot easily adapt into the role of a child, dependent and subordinate to the teacher. In contrast, Leathwood and O'Connell (2003, p. 599) argue that the issues actually lie with HE policy discourse, not teaching and learner roles. They contend that mature students and non-traditional students struggle to align with the concept of the 'ideal learner' present in policy literature, as they appear autonomous, confident, individualistic, with no domestic responsibilities or financial difficulties. With the characteristics of this ideal learner sounding very like a young, white, middle class, able-bodied man, this means that students who do not fit with the characteristics of the ideal learner might experience indirect discrimination when trying to adapt.

Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) suggest that this idealised expectation of students evolved in HE policy, at the same time as Widening Participation policy began to open up opportunities to new types of students in HE, in the late 1990s. They contend that students were seen to be autonomous, self-directed, active consumers, taking responsibility for their own learning. Evidently this stance ignores both the barriers that mature students bring with them as well as failing to acknowledge the difficulties they experience during the transition period (Crozier, et al., 2008; Tinto, 1975). Furthermore, Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) state that the application of the 'non-traditional student' label re-enforces difference for people who do not fit into the mould of an ideal learner, such as mature, ethnic minority and underprivileged students. Drawing from the work of Skeggs' (1997) on the marginalisation of the working classes, they argue that non-traditional students are envisioned in a similar way to historic attitudes to the working classes and are seen as deficient in a number of ways: lacking in sufficient education, aspiration, attitude and ability. They maintain that this shapes attitudes, which also act as barriers, both from educators and peers seeing and treating non-traditional students as

deficient; this is also seen to come from the student themselves, as a reaction to their own marginalisation.

### 3.3: Social Adaptation

As social expectations feed into individuals' decisions to engage in HE (White, 2007), as will be discussed in Chapter 4: Motivation, they also inevitably affect students' adaptation. Social norms concerning age and participation in education in the UK were initially designed around the practicalities of life and work, particularly after the Factory Act of 1833 barred children under 9 from working. As technology and industry developed, governments have come to understand that workers needed to be educated. Gorard et al. (2002) demonstrate the increase in highly qualified young people entering the labour market, often gaining these qualifications directly after compulsory education. But for individuals who failed to qualify for HE, or chose not to continue their education earlier in their life, it might be possible that they are marred when they try to re-engage later in HE later than the traditional age. Indeed, Gorard et al. (2002) contend that adult work-based learning has not increased and that socio-economic inequalities have increased in adult participation in education in general. In respect of HE it could be argued that the older a student is when they start university, the more unusual they appear to be. This might mean that studying is more difficult because they failed to do it at the right time, according to societal norms. In keeping with this idea, Field (2006) contends that our society is geared to the idea that we only engage in education and training at designated points in life, but he argues that the ability to continually learn is actually evident throughout our lives. Moreover, he highlights that although participation in education is often about making reasoned decisions, it is also tied to preconditioned choices about the direction of our lives. Rubenson's (2007) ideas of the influence of family and work on the timeliness on adults' readiness to engage in learning, echo Field's contention. The "long arm of the family" (Rubenson, 2007, p. 115) for example, relates to links between participation in adult education and an individual's family background, educational levels and employment, which is seeded in early life and follows them throughout their decisions in life. However, Foster (2009, p. 7) found that many mature students 'stumbled on HE, by accident', so their decisions were not prescribed.

This section will consider the social side of adapting to university, in respect of the relationships mature students have with their peers and the educators that they interact with, during the course of their undergraduate degree. It gives focus to the idea of fitting in with peers and social groups and forming meaningful relationships and also considers social spaces, such as the design

of academic activities and mature students' perceptions of how welcoming different universities feel, in terms of environmental factors.

### 3.3.1: The HE Environment

Adapting to the environment can be an important part of developing a sense of belonging. The need to belong is often seen as an important part of the human psyche and in any new environment belonging can be seen as the highest level of adaptation. Belonging is certainly a key feature in much of the literature on undergraduate students, as it is seen to be a key part of helping students succeed. Some of this literature will be discussed here, sometimes intertwined with threads from the literature discussed in Chapter 4: Motivation and Chapter 5: Barriers, because of their relevance to students' sense of social belonging in HE.

Goodenow (1993, p. 25), gives a detailed description of belonging here, based on her research with children in schools:

'[a] sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teacher and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class. More than simple perceived liking or warmth, it also involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual.'

Although Goodenow's definition here relates to children, it provides a good outline of how all learners might feel about belonging in education. However, given the dominance of traditional-aged students in HE, mature students may feel unable to integrate within the classroom and at university in general.

The HE institution is also important in terms of its reputation, as peers and the university campus are important elements in decision-making for mature students. Environment is seen to be an important factor in research on student adaptation. Reay's research (2004; Reay, et al., 2010) found that mature students chose HE institutions based on whether they felt comfortable in that environment. Whilst the young non-traditional students in Christie's (2009) research set their sights on elite universities, believing that enrolling at a post-1992 university was not good enough to take a risk on. Reay (2004) highlights in her research with Access to HE students (n=120) that the opposite was the case. For example, non-traditional students turned down places they were offered at higher ranking universities and accepted places at post-1992 or lower ranking universities, because they felt that they would perform better in HE environments where they felt they fitted in. Leathwood and Connell's (2003) questionnaire research (n=310) also found that students chose the case study post-1992 university because they felt that they were more likely to fit in at its diverse student community, unlike other more formal universities.

They found that despite this, students still felt they were 'other' in the institution because of the way they spoke or because other students appeared to be less serious about their studies. Traditional-aged working-class students were also likely to cite similar concerns in Reay et al.'s (Reay, et al., 2010) case study (n=27) and Christie's (2009)'s research.

Although both Reay's (2009) and Christie et al.'s (2008) research is a little limited, because they are smaller scale and restricted to a single region or institution, they provide valuable insights into non-traditional students' expectations, which are echoed in Leathwood and Connell's larger scale research. They indicate important issues which may impact on some mature students' ability to successfully adapt. However, as the specific age of mature students is not considered in these studies, it is not possible to see whether particular aged students felt the lack of fit more keenly, or how long this feeling persisted.

The style of teaching in HE institutions can also be an issue for mature students. McGivney (1996) found difficulties with the contrast between the more intimate, interactive and supportive environment experienced on mature student courses in the community, such as Access to HE, and the hands-off, detached experience of formal lectures. Gill (1993) also notes that traditional forms of teaching in HE, such as lectures, make social adaptation difficult, which he believes also impacts on academic adaptation. He argues that as students spend around three-quarters of their student life in hierarchical forms of teaching, which he terms 'military-like' (Gill, 1993, p. 71), all students are denied the opportunity for communal learning behaviours, which restricts adaptation. He argues that the process of knowing involves experience through both visual and verbal interaction, so this type of learning denies students a voice: *'The experience is not one of a more experienced learner engaging interactively with other learners, but one of "the expert" handing down esoteric and privileged data to the lowly initiates'* (Gill, 1993, p. 71). As traditional-aged students tend to experience university on a different level to mature students, because they both live and learn at university, it seems likely that they might overcome these restrictions for social adaptation, because of their living situation, which provides the communal learning behaviours Gill feels are lacking in the teaching situation. It is debateable as to whether mature students have this same opportunity to access communal learning outside the learning environment, firstly because social activities in universities are often designed to meet the needs of younger students, and secondly because mature students tend to be restricted by commuting, caring and employment responsibilities (as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5).

### 3.3.2: Fitting in at University

Mature students' attitudes about their own difference, coupled with the way their peers and teachers view their difference, may also feed into a lack of belonging at university. Foster's (2009) research with 334 students considering study in HE is a good example of this. Some of the mature students said that they felt that pre-1992 institutions were 'snobby' and implied that they were looking for 'high-flyers' so they actively rejected offers from these institutions because they felt they did not want students like them (Foster, 2009, p. 52).

Difficulties in adapting and being isolated as a learner are largely viewed in the literature as having a negative impact (Ryan & Glenn, 2004; Doman & Roux, 2010), though research detailing this issue is limited. Many of the factors associated with starting university are seen to lead to loneliness and isolation (Doman & Roux, 2010) such as leaving home, being separated from loved ones, moving to a new house, starting a new career, poor academic performance and a lack of feelings of belonging, intimacy and support. Although some of these issues also affect mature students, Doman & Roux (2010) maintain that young people aged 18-25 appear to be more prone to loneliness, suggesting that social adaptation problems should be more evident for traditional-aged and younger mature students. However, Mallman and Lee (2017) found that young mature students (aged early 20s to early 30s) were more isolated than other ages of student in their research. Students (n=344), who were in the first year of an anthropology module at a university in Melbourne, Australia, detailed ethnographic reflections of their experiences. Many of the younger mature students felt a lack of fit, because they felt they were the only person who was not either a school leaver or a mature student. This made it difficult for them to find a place to belong socially at their university. The lack, or a perceived lack of people of a similar age, therefore, can lead to students feeling lonely, isolated and with the feeling that they cannot fit in this environment which can mean that students struggle to adapt socially.

### 3.4: Adaptation and Persistence

Successful adaptation appears to be particularly important in terms of persistence. As discussed, for some mature students, the only important aspect of adaptation was academic (Meehan & Negy, 2003), but social adaptation certainly seemed to be important for other mature students, when considering how to effectively negotiate their participation in HE (Foster, 2009; Reay, et al., 2010). Piaget's (1936) ideas on different levels of survival are also relevant here, as he underlined that preservation was tied to both the environment and the organism adapting to one another. Unlike performance, there is a range of research which considers the importance

of adaptation in helping students persist during their studies in HE, some of which will be discussed here.

Piaget's work (1936) on different degrees of adaptation demonstrates the particular pressure on students to quickly adapt to the university environment, which may explain why students might be prone to drop out in the First Year of study. For example, Tinto (1993) asserted that students were at their most vulnerable to withdrawing in their First Year at university or college. Harrison (2006) also highlights this in his research of undergraduate students, who had withdrawn during their First Year of study. He found that adapting to the academic environment was seen to be difficult for many, even students who had a strong motivation for their chosen course, suggesting that this was a factor relating to their decision to drop out. Wilcox, et al.'s (2005) study, with 34 social science students at the end of their First Year at the University of Brighton found that whilst finances (n=3), personal issues (n=3) and poor attendance (n=1) were cited as additional reasons for dropping out, difficulties adapting socially were most prevalent (n=11) in interviews. Academic issues were also commonly cited, such as independent study (n=6) or unhappy with course (n=4), unhappy with university (n=4) or not getting their first choice (n=2). Students in the sample were broadly representative of the wider body of students at the university with 25 traditional-age and 9 mature students, though they do not clearly differentiate between the age groups in their findings. Tinto's argument also looks at difficulties lying in social adaptation, rather than academic adaptation, suggesting that 'malintegration' leads to drop-out. He believed this was a combination of a student having very different values from the social collective and not having enough personal interaction with students and other members of the university community (Tinto, 1975, p. 91). Whilst this perspective puts the emphasis on students adapting socially, it also has connotations for students adapting in academic terms, as it suggests that students who separate themselves will be vulnerable in terms of retention, because they lack peer support in the academic environment. Therefore, it appears that persistence is linked to both successful social adaptation and academic adaptation, unlike performance, which seems to only rest on academic adaptation.

However, adapting socially also seems to be linked to prior experiences (Crozier, et al., 2008), rather than simply being down to whether students share the same values and interact with other people at university. For example, some students may be better placed to adapt to educational norms and expectations because of their social class (Furlong & Cartmel, 2009; Reay, 2004). This is relevant both for traditional-aged students and for mature students, though recent engagement in education might override previous negative experiences or replace spoiled schemas of education. The type of previous educational experience seems to be

important though. For instance, Harrison (2006: p381) found that having alternative qualifications had an impact on adaptation. He found that students whose previous qualifications were not A-levels experienced problems coping with the transition to the teaching environment in higher education, which often differed to how they had been taught previously. Different levels of staff support, and the size of teaching groups, were the main issues these students cited in this regard (Harrison, 2006). This again has implications for younger students who will have alternative qualifications when they enter HE, as well as for mature students who tend to qualify through Access to HE courses (QAA, 2018) and other non-traditional courses (Foster, 2009). So, how an individual's ability to adapt is complicated by other factors, is important here, particularly as experiences from both within and outside of their education can affect this. The idea that persistence can be affected by background factors conflicting with adaptation has been acknowledged by a range of research including that of Reay et al. (2010) and Drury et al. (2008), which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

## Conclusions

It has become evident in this chapter that whilst academic adaptation and social adaption can be achieved separately, social adaptation can result in academic benefits in terms of students' enjoyment of university and in terms of supportive networks (including educators and peers). However, from the literature discussed, social adaptation seems to be much more difficult for mature students to negotiate (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Foster, 2009) than for traditional-age students (Christie, 2009), despite similarities in socio-economic background.

It also appears that academic adaptation presents challenges for mature students that differ somewhat to the challenges cited by traditional-age students, such as difficulties linked to mature students' learning identities (Chapman, 2017; Reay, et al., 2010). Longer-term research would be useful in this respect, however, to consider how mature students' identities evolve during their studies. In terms of student performance by age there are notable contradictions present in the literature, which confirms, somewhat, that degree classifications are not particularly useful in assessing experiences of performance (Gill, 1993; Dewey, 1938). There is certainly nothing in this research that suggests that mature students are less academically able than traditional-age students, or that particular ages of mature students perform better academically than others.

# Chapter 4: Mature Student Motivations in HE

## Introduction

Our rigid structures mean that access routes to higher education take place outside the schooling system and apply to adults rather than teenagers. We do not seek to correct the effects of schooling immediately. Rather we wait until the alienation has weakened through the confused years ... of the late teens. As people move into their twenties, maturity, family responsibility and career needs come to the forefront and they become more susceptible to the benefits to be obtained by the qualifications provided by the higher education experience (Wagner, 1989, p. 33).

Although Wagner is referring here to education in the US, his comments also reflect motivations for mature students in the UK. As discussed previously, life-stage certainly seems to have an impact on students' decisions to participate (Schuller & Watson, 2009) and this also affects the factors that motivate them to complete an undergraduate degree (Foster, 2009). Indeed Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological model highlights that decision-making is influenced by these different factors through the contexts that exist in an individual's life, such as home, employment, education and community. He argues that these elements exert influence on the individual through their 'nested arrangement of structures' (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 514) placing limits on their choices, which is also acknowledged in Foster's (2009) research. Carré (2000, p. 2) maintains that 'motivation is an indispensable ingredient of learning', so its relationship with the challenges of education is essential in understanding the performance and the persistence of mature students. But, as UK policy becomes increasingly preoccupied with educating people whilst they are young, mature students must be more motivated than ever to participate in HE, because of the financial risks and because of the restrictions they face in accessing it. The market-led policy approach in HE, as previously discussed, seems to have introduced a preoccupation with career goals. This chapter will consider whether this approach is relevant for mature students.

Indeed, in contrast to the suggestions in the 2016 White Paper (Her Majesty's Government, 2016), which placed career outcomes as a priority for all students, it is apparent that mature students' motivations are not so simplistic. As will be considered, McVitty & Morris (2012) maintain that mature students have a diverse range of motivations, which is also illustrated in detail in Carré's model of motivation for adult education and training (Carre, 2000). Carré highlights ten motives for participating, of which seven are classed as extrinsic, which relate to



the external benefits of participation. These include economic benefits, participating to avoid activities perceived as unpleasant, participating at the instruction of others, gaining skills for professional purposes, and gaining skills for purposes outside of employment. The remaining three motives are classed as intrinsic, which relate to intellectual benefits such as learning for its own sake, seeking interpersonal relationships, and pleasure gained from being in the educational environment. Hinton-Smith (2012) reports that many mature students have mixed motivations for entering HE, which she describes as both vocational and personal development. As mature students' motivations tend to be more complex, there are often multiple reasons for their participation.

Whilst this was not necessarily acknowledged in the literature on adaptation, motivations form an important element of undergraduate students' experiences. Whilst the first chapter considered which students participate in HE, this chapter will build on this by considering why they participate and what they hope to gain through participation. It will also consider how motivation and the adaptation process interacts. Consequently, this chapter will consider a range of student motivations, looking at instrumental motivations, which are considered as outcome-based in this thesis, and then move to intellectual motivations, which are seen here as motivations that relate to fulfilment and achievement. In the last part of this chapter, consideration will be given to motivations during students' studies, to see whether motivations generally change for mature students or if initial motivations persist.

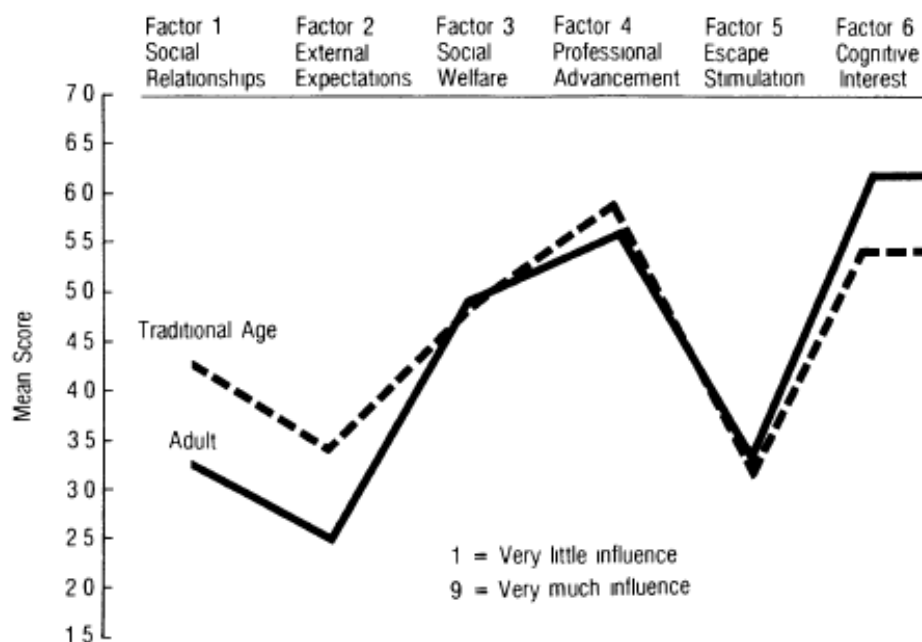
## 4.1: Instrumental Motivations

Instrumental motivations are seen here as having a tangible outcome, such as students gaining employment, or improving their financial position. To some degree the motivations discussed here link to what is termed extrinsic motivation in Carré's model of motivation and within Psychology disciplines. However, some research findings show that mature students' motivations are often characterised by a combination of social, personal and technical factors (Hinton-Smith, 2012; McVitty & Morris, 2012), but in other research skill development is the main outcome, despite the existence of other motivations (Elliot & Brna, 2009; Wolfgang & Dowling, 1981). In contrast, HE policy seems to assume that career development is most students' priority, neglecting other factors that might motivate mature students to participate. This section will consider literature that looks at employment motivations, both in terms of financial gain and fulfilment, and the influence of family.

### 4.1.1: Gaining Employment

Whilst there is a good deal of research looking at the motivations of mature and non-traditional students, there is much less discussion of the motivation of traditional-aged students. It could be assumed that the focus on employment relates to traditional-aged students, because they have been encouraged from an early age to perceive that the primary purpose of HE is to gain good employment (Christie, 2009). Although it is almost 30 years old, Wolfgang and Dowling's (1981) questionnaire research on 325 First and Second-Year students at Ohio State University, gives insight into how age can vary motivation. They have illustrated their findings in Figure 4.1, below:

Figure 4.1: Adult and Traditional-Age student scores on the Education Participation Scale (Wolfgang & Dowling, 1981, p. 644)



It is evident from Figure 4.1, that both adult and traditional-aged students were motivated by professional advancement, with adults only slightly less likely to choose this motivation. It is also apparent that adults were more motivated by cognitive interest than traditional-aged students, who were more motivated by social relationships. As this is a US example undertaken many years ago, it may not fully represent English undergraduate motivations, although it is interesting to note how motivating factors for students vary by their age. The findings in Osbourne et al.'s (2004) research also give some idea of age differences, but only within the mature students group. The interview part of their research, which took place in 2000, looked at the decision-making process of 110 mature students who were intending to study HE at one of three English, or three Scottish universities. They classified these mature students into 6

groups but found that students who were in their twenties, whom they termed 'delayed traditional students', were very similar to traditional-aged students in terms of their commitments, interests, and motivation. Most of them stated that they had come to university because they felt this was necessary to help them to open doors to meaningful and interesting employment, or gain access to their preferred career. However, a small number maintained that they were studying a degree for personal fulfilment, which will be discussed later in this chapter. However, young mature students share many similar characteristics to traditional-age students, so they could be seen to have more similar motivations to traditional-age students than mature students. It could be argued, therefore, that traditional-aged students may also be more motivated by career outcomes too.

However, Osbourne et al. (2004) also found that employment was not only important for younger mature students, but for mature students in general, who were in employment. They wanted to study to improve their employment opportunities and to move into better status roles. Carré's (2000) research with adults enrolled on short professional courses (n=1139) also showed this difference, finding that the motivations of students fell into two different groups. The motivations within these groups were very different. One group were older, held more qualifications, were more likely to be employed in higher status professions and were generally male. Their motivation was generally to gain professional skills to advance their employment. The other group, who were younger and more likely to be in low status jobs, or unemployed, had a much wider range of motivations for learning. Interestingly these included all Carré's motivational factors, except gaining professional skills to advance employment. However, this is probably not surprising, given that the older group were already in high status employment, so advancing this was probably the most sensible thing to do. This is in direct contrast to the younger group, who were more likely to be unemployed or in low level jobs, so they might struggle to see how they could select 'enhancing their employment' when they either had no employment to enhance or employment that they could not enhance. Also, as education was more likely to have a transformative effect on the lives of the people in the second group, it follows that their motivations would be more detailed and diverse.

McVitty and Morris (2012) also looked at the motivations of mature students in their report. They highlighted that there was a range of motivating factors across the mature student group. They found that employability was certainly a motivating factor for many mature students, featuring highly in survey responses. Generally it was not the only reason for studying as for some it was seen as a 'means to an end; a way of enhancing employability and skills while studying a subject of interest and acquiring a qualification that enables them to change careers,

access employment opportunities that would otherwise remain out of reach and/or improve earnings potential' (McVitty & Morris, 2012, p. 16). Elliot and Brna's (2009) questionnaire research also highlights that, although many of the students who intended to pursue a degree (n=182) were sometimes motivated by other factors, the most important consideration was to improve employment prospects by improving their level of qualifications. Hinton Smith (2012) also highlights that motivations for mature lone parents are multifaceted. In particular she reports that many wish to enter HE because they are discontented with their employment, and the low income it gives them, and want to provide more for their family. Hinton-Smith highlights that exploitation at work and in the family means that women are often driven to enter HE in order to secure better employment opportunities.

The effects of the financial crisis on employment have also been noted as a significant factor in motivating mature students to return to university. Kearns's (2014) small-scale interview and diary research with 30 First Year mature students, from two Irish universities in the 2012/13 academic year, demonstrates this. He found that half of his participants gave employment reasons for returning to education, such as redundancy, failing to secure meaningful or sustainable employment, economic hardship and failure of a business. Most of his participants were first time undergraduates, but 10 had previously studied on a degree before (only 4 had completed their studies). Kearns notes that this demonstrates that problems in the economy led to employment difficulties, which motivated these mature students to enrol in HE. Although Kearns's research is based on students studying in Ireland, his observations in terms of employment also reflect some of the more detailed findings from Osbourne et al.'s (2004) larger-scale interview research. They looked at the decision-making process of 110 students who were intending to study HE at one of five universities in Britain (three English and three Scottish universities). They found a much wider range of motivations across the mature student group, but in line with Kearns's (2014) research, Osbourne et al. (2004) found that many students from the group they classified as 'late starters' had also been motivated by redundancy.

Walker and Zhu's (2013) report argues that the expansion of HE has led to a decline in its perception as a way to become learned. They highlight that policy changes and the introduction of fees has meant that studying in HE is now seen as an investment decision, in order to secure a well-paid job, which aligns with Christie's (Christie, 2009) findings with young non-traditional students and with Osbourne et al.'s (2004) findings with young mature students. Walker and Zhu (2013) used the Labour Force Survey and British Household Panel Survey datasets to simulate predicted earnings for graduates. As a result of this exercise they maintain that there is 28% earnings increase for men and 53% increase for women, once they have obtained

a degree. But Adnett and Slack (2007) argue that graduate premium studies misrepresent the returns from HE study, because they use average earnings which do not accurately reflect the earnings of working class students. Their review of recent research on Widening Participation, in the UK, led them to conclude that that mass participation in HE has not been accompanied by an increase in the number of graduate employment opportunities. They argue that this has led to a growing perception that attending HE may not result in better wages, due to a lack of graduate job opportunities (Adnett & Slack, 2007). This might be particularly pertinent for low participation groups, such as mature students, who arguably must take more risks to engage in HE.

#### 4.1.2: Access to Fulfilling Employment

It is also apparent that students are not only motivated to enter HE to improve their career for improving income prospects, but some are primarily motivated to pursue more fulfilling employment. This motivation is highlighted by the students in Elliot and Brna's (2009) research, but the lack of age-specific detail masks whether this influences students at specific points in their lives, or whether students of all ages can be influenced by a need for a fulfilling job. It may be that mature students who have had experiences of employment were more influenced by this than traditional-aged students, who may not have experienced unfulfilling employment. This detail can be seen in Osborne et al.'s (2004) research, as they look at the differing motivations of mature students, specifically. They demonstrate that whilst some mature students are motivated by career and economic gains, a large proportion cite their family and improving their self-esteem as their main motivation, supporting the contention that multiple influences are at play in decision-making (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Foster, 2009). This could be interpreted as fulfilment, by improving their employment status, but also through intellectual stimulation, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

The double benefit of accessing more fulfilling jobs and improving students' financial situations is also acknowledged by Tatlow and Conlon (2013) in their report on the economic costs and benefits of investment in HE for Million+ and LSE. They argue that a degree not only reduces dependency on state benefits, by providing people with access to a financial premium, but that a degree also enables people to gain more fulfilling jobs. However, as this discussion is restricted and uses average wages to demonstrate the benefits of a degree (as criticised by Adnett and Slack (2007), above), it is difficult to understand what ages of student might be motivated by these different factors. Whilst there is no discussion of how age might feed into these motivations, Tatlow and Conlon's (2013) idea resonates somewhat with Hinton-Smith's (2012) findings, in her mature single parent sample. She contends that female middle-class single

parents often use HE to gain access to professions, both for fulfilment and to achieve economic independence. It has not been possible to identify research that specifically compares the employment motivations of traditional-age students to mature students, however.

#### 4.1.3: Family

Whilst employment often seems to form a dimension of motivation amongst students, it is also apparent that students' families often have an important influence on their participation in HE. As will be discussed here, for traditional-age and possibly younger mature students, parents' expectations can be a motivation for going to university (White, 2012; Jenkins, 2017; Finn, 2017; White, 2007). But students who are older might gain motivation from other members of their family, such as their children (Hinton-Smith, 2012; Callender, et al., 2014).

Gorard and Smith (2007) suggest that there is a link between family background and participation in education beyond 16. They propose that there could be two explanations for this pattern. Firstly, children might inherit their academic abilities. Their parents' talent may have also meant that their high income, and experience of education, would make it easier to pass this talent on to their children. Secondly the income and the education of parents influences their values and aspirations, which will be communicated to their children, throughout their upbringing. This is illustrated in one of Finn's (2017, p. 747) longitudinal case studies, Stacey, who described the university experience as a natural transition into adulthood, which she described as 'getting out and getting away'. This was a view that was also shared by her family, as both of her parents had had a university education. Jenkins' (2017) investigation into later HE participation found that students in the baby boomer generation, who upgraded their qualifications in mid-life, were more likely to come from families where parents had expected them to stay on at 18. White (2007, p. 90) also highlights that students can make what he terms 'default choices' which are made by students who are not fully engaged in the decision-making process. His research with year 11 pupils from seven schools, highlights that rather than choosing what to do after compulsory education based on their own interests, some students had no direction, so they acted on normative values from their family or their community. This suggests that parental influence can motivate both young and mature students to study in HE, demonstrating the power of family socialisation in instilling views on the value of HE.

Gorard and Smith (2007) also note the importance of the community students grow up in, as this was also seen to perpetuate ideas about the value of HE, in a similar way to parents. But this instrumental motivation can have positive and negative results in terms of negotiating a degree as, unlike with employment goals, students may not be driven during their studies. For

example, Gorard and Smith (2007) highlight that some students pursued HE because they felt influenced to do so, not because they actively chose to study at that level. The influence of family and peers also seemed to have a more positive effect on the motivation of older mature students in Jamieson's (2016) research. Her investigation into the role of HE in retirement (biographical interviews with 45 students) found that a positive outcome for students who gained a HE qualification was the endorsement received from their peers and family members. This demonstrates how the views of family and friends feeds into students' own views of their education, both before and during studying. Though in Jamieson's research (2016), it was apparent that family and peers were not generally their initial motivation for enrolling in HE, which was for intellectual stimulation, as discussed later in the chapter.

Perhaps for mature students the influence of family takes a different form. One example is found in McVitty and Morris's (2012) research, where their workshop participants discussed their intention to prove other people wrong about their abilities, by studying in HE, perhaps as a reaction to the deviant learner identity (Gorard, 2002). Perhaps more importantly, now that financial and personal circumstances allowed them to return to education, these mature students maintained that they wanted to set a good example to both their friends and family. This theme of inspiring children and improving their chances in life is very evident in other small-scale research. As Kearns (2014, p. 101) highlights here, whilst motivations were multi-faceted for the mature students in his research, their motivations were focused on outcomes for both students and their families:

'While HE holds a deep-held, personal, significance for many in this sample group, there is very little evidence to suggest that this is positioned as any form of lifestyle option; rather, it can be seen that participants in this study also retain highly pragmatic, instrumental, reasons relating to career progression and improved life chances for themselves, their families and for their wider communities.'

Osbourne et al. (2004) also demonstrate that a significant motivating factor is being a role model for students who have children and grandchildren. Mannay and Morgan's (2013) in-depth research with three mature student mothers, also showed that giving children a better life, and inspiring them to do the same, was a primary motivation. This was also evident in larger scale research by Callender et al. (2014). They surveyed and interviewed 145 Birkbeck and 103 Open University students who were studying part-time introductory HE courses at 11 Children's Centres across London. These courses had been purposefully placed in low-participation areas and targeted at potential students who were parents, to try to widen participation. Almost two in every five students said that their initial motivation was to be a role model for their children,

though helping their children with their education was also a common motivation, chosen by just under a quarter of the sample.

Therefore, it is apparent that family can be important for motivating both mature and traditional-aged students, but perhaps for different reasons (social norms, or transforming life-chances). Again, as with employment motivations, it would be interesting to consider the different familial influences on students, broken down by students' age.

## 4.2: Intellectual Motivations

As detailed in Carré's (2002) model of motivation, students can be motivated by factors that do not result in a tangible outcome. Two of Carré's intrinsic motives are considered here: pleasure gained from being in the educational environment and learning for its own sake, though because there is a cross-over between the terms in the research these topics were discussed in terms of intellectual fulfilment and achievement motives instead.

Wolfgang and Dowling (1981) also highlighted that cognitive interest was more of a motivation for mature students than it was for traditional-age students. Some of the motivations discussed in this section relate to the intrinsic motivations in Carré's (2000) model and also those discussed in Psychology. As previously mentioned, these motivations do not seem to be recognised in recent HE policy (Her Majesty's Government, 2016), which focusses on career-based outcomes. However, Rothes et al. (2014) argue that, as intrinsic motivation is fully autonomous and self-determined, it is an optimal state of motivation. Therefore, this type of motivation might have important implications for the performance and resilience of students. This section will look at research on motivations for intellectual fulfilment and achievement.

### 4.2.1: Fulfilment

McVitty and Morris (2012) found that some of the mature students in their research had always wanted to engage with a subject they love at university. Being part of an intellectual community was also cited by students as another part of this motivation. This was seen to be the most dominant motivation, as it was the most common motivation cited by survey participants. But as there are no age groupings in McVitty and Morris's findings, it is difficult to understand if all ages of mature students feel this way. Jamieson (2016) invited students to explain the benefits of study and found that most commonly-cited benefit was gaining subject specific knowledge, the next most important was general intellectual stimulation, followed by personal development. She also maintains that there were no notable differences in the answers of mature and young students (Jamieson, 2016, p. 481):



‘The (misguided) view that older learners are just there ‘for the fun’, for social reasons, is not borne out of this evidence. The item ‘meeting new people/making friends’ was not highlighted as a benefit by many, whether old or young.’

However, as the students she included were at Birkbeck and the Open University and would be part-time, motivations might be very different amongst full-time undergraduates. It is useful to know, however, that there is no clear difference in the motivations of these older and younger students.

Osborne et al. (2004) suggest that variations in personal responsibilities influence different motivations within the mature student group in their research. Though four of the categories they used detailed career related motivation, the *late starters’* and *personal growers’* (2004, p. 291) motivation was related to fulfilment through studying at university. Factors highlighted by the students who fell into these categories referred to personal enrichment, with aspirational reasons such as ‘time for me’, as well as ‘enjoyment of subject’. Although students who were *single parents* as well as *delayed traditional* tended to choose career related outcomes, Osbourne et al. found that they also detailed other motivating factors such as their family and their self-esteem. Therefore, whilst intellectual motivation was important, this often accompanies instrumental outcomes, such as employment.

#### 4.2.2: Achievement

Research on students who are motivated by achievement seems to focus largely on mature or non-traditional students. Whether that is because mature and non-traditional students are the only ones motivated by achievement or whether research has simply not considered that this might influence traditional-aged students is not clear. It might also be the case that the education ‘conveyor belt’ (Gorard, 2002) from school to HE is so well-established that this has resulted in a lack of research on younger students’ motivations.

For some mature students, purely achieving a HE qualification is their motivation and for others gaining a good quality HE qualification is a goal. Some of the mature students placed into Osbourne et al.’s (2004) *late starter* and *personal grower* groups entered HE because they had a desire to achieve a qualification. This motivation is often intertwined with other motivations for mature students, as demonstrated in the comments from students in McVitty and Morris’ (2012) research with participants in workshops. They maintain that they expressed how much they appreciated having the opportunity to challenge themselves. Jamieson (2016) also found that many of the older mature students in her survey research were motivated by the qualification, but even those who saw it as a secondary motivation claimed that they chose an assessed university so they could get a high quality education package. This was also evident in

Christie's (2009) research with young non-traditional students, who did not want a qualification from a Post-1992 university, because they felt that they wanted to use this opportunity to get the best undergraduate qualification, which to them meant studying at a Pre-1992 university. The process of gaining a qualification was also seen as particularly important for Jamieson's students, as she highlights here (2016, p. 484):

'They reported a need for a goal and some imposed discipline; they needed to be challenged to the full; to cite some typical responses, it was a kind of 'masochistic pleasure, to feel I can still do it'; to feel 'I am not wasting my time'. There is therefore no doubt that access to studying for a qualification can bring immense benefit to some older people. It provides a sense of achievement, social recognition, and it adds to personal self-esteem and psychological well-being.'

Elliot and Brna (2009) also found that achievement was important in motivating mature students to study HE, as out of the 182 mature students, who stated that they would definitely like to pursue a degree, 83% selected personal achievement as one of their motivators. This was the second most popular answer after being motivated by developing their skills and knowledge (87%), which shows that both types of motivation were seen as important. Christie et al. (2005) also found this amongst their mature student group, where both instrumental motivations and those of seeking the educational experience were important. They also found that women were more likely to emphasise that they were studying for personal development than men were.

But whilst it is apparent that achievement is important for many mature students, it is less apparent if this is also the same for most traditional-age students. It would also be useful to understand if those with a larger gap in their education, such as older mature students, might be more motivated by achievement than those who have left education more recently, as it is also important to acknowledge motivation is not fixed and can change. If this initial motivation changes as students progress through their studies, it might also have an effect on their experiences.

### 4.3: Motivation during study

It seems likely that some students' initial motivation might change during their studies, but whether this is the same for traditional-age and mature undergraduate students is again difficult to see. Gorard (2002) suggests that mature students often have strong motivations when they are in informal learning, but this is not found in statistical publications, because this information is not captured by policy-makers who are preoccupied by formal learning routes. Even in formal learning routes, such as HE, information on motivation during study is patchy. As discussed here, research appears to be restricted to either transition into HE or First Year experiences.

From this small-scale research, we are still able to gain some ideas of how mature students' motivations change. For example, in Elliott and Brna's (2009) research, some mature students' motivations changed once they had had a positive experience in education. They highlight that bad experiences at school led to instrumental motivations, where students only saw education as a necessary means to gain a qualification. However, once they started their courses this seems to change some students' motivations when they realise their potential, which makes them want to extend their HE studies, to achieve their full potential. There is also evidence of this in other research in Scotland. Bamber and Tett's (2000) research in the Lothian region is useful in illustrating the process that some mature student parents go through, in HE, in terms of their motivation. They conducted interviews and collected course data from 18 adult students who were recruited onto a special BA in Community Education course, designed for working class community activists who had no qualifications. They used course records to understand initial motivations and interviews to understand the students' experiences. They found that there was a transition process visible for many of the students. Those who progressed through Bamber and Tett's 4 phases of transition (Entitlement, Disposition, Theory & Practice and Becoming Professional) emerged with the confidence and a desire to either continue their education or apply for positions they would not have considered before. This suggests that their ongoing motivation was different from their initial motivation for engaging in HE, due to their increased confidence as learners.

As in Elliott and Brna's (2009) study, many students started their course with a focus on gaining the qualification, which is described as a "meal ticket" (Bamber & Tett, 2000, p. 64). They explain that this was because these students' communities had an undesirable view of becoming an academic or a professional, communicating a negative view of education for itself. However, once they started to engage with the course, some experienced positive changes in their own environment, resulting from their families seeing them studying for a degree. They maintain that this both fuelled these students' motivation and made them more determined to succeed. This in turn raised their children's educational aspirations, with all students reporting that their children had improved their efforts and commitment at school.

There are also more recent findings from research which aligns with this, outside of Scotland. Callender et al.'s (2014) larger piece of research, with student parents, found that the way mature students felt about themselves had changed. This was very apparent in interviews where students said they were more confident, calmer, more patient, more knowledgeable, and that they had gained a much better understanding of their children. The influence of family was also evident, as in their survey they found that 84% of the course participants said that their children

had higher aspirations in education because of seeing their parent studying. Whether these aspirations continued after their parents had finished their studies is not known, though. However, unlike the other research, Callender et al. (2014) found that students' motivation did not change if they were initially motivated by their family and being a better role model for their children, as this remained their focus.

It is also important to note that Callender et al.'s (2014), Elliot and Brna's (2009) and Bamber and Tett's (2000) research all highlight that previous negative experiences in education were superseded by positive experiences when returning to education. This is likely to change motivations during studies, as shown in Elliot and Brna's and Bamber and Tett's research. Callender et al. highlight that some parents used their earlier educational experiences as cautionary tales, highlighting the error of their ways, to advise their children to study while they are young to make the most of the opportunities available. This is also reflected in Gorard's (2002) comments, as he maintains that there is a dominant view in policy which characterises later learning as deviance. He believes this downplays the powerful motivation mature students have in education in general. Callender et al.'s (2014) findings demonstrate that students went through the same process described by Bamber and Tett (2000), leaving their HE programmes with the confidence to pursue further study or engage in employment.

Whilst these studies give us an idea of how motivation might change for mature students, again, whether this is the same as traditional-aged students' motivation changes is not apparent. It is also important to acknowledge that in both Bamber and Tett's (2000) and Callender et al.'s research, students were enrolled on courses specifically designed for them. This means that whilst they give us an idea of how initial motivation can evolve for students with children, these findings may not be representative of mature student experiences on full-time courses taught at a university.

The role of motivation could be seen to be important in helping students to continue their studies. For example, where there is a lack of motivation, it seems more likely students are vulnerable to drop-out, particularly when they are faced with challenges in HE. Reardon & Bertoch's (2010) research suggests that the strength of motivation students have, and the confidence they have in pursuing their goals, appears to have some influence on decisions to drop out. They conducted a self-report survey, with 190 students in a large state university in the USA, using a goal instability scale. They found that students who had higher motivation gained more of the extra credit points. However, they acknowledge that the students involved in the research may have been more motivated than students in general, so this might mask the

reality of the effect student motivation has on performance. There is no support from other research for these findings either. Also, as it is based on students studying in America, it may not reflect the experiences mature or traditional-age student experiences in HE in the UK. However, if we are to believe that mature students are more likely to be motivated by personal goals than traditional-age students, as previously discussed, this might make them more confident learners and more determined. Consequently, Reardon & Bertoch's (2010) findings would suggest that it is not simply poor motivation that causes drop-out, but perhaps the influences other factors have on students' level of motivation.

As discussed in the next chapter, barriers are not only damaging in their own right, but they also seem to play an important role in reducing levels of motivation in students in general, but certainly for mature students. Busher et al. (2015) investigated Access to HE student experiences across 7 FE colleges across a region of England. Survey data was collected from a large group of mostly mature students (n=500), and interviews collected from a smaller group within this sample (n=60). They found that employment and family often created distractions to their studies, which often impacted on their level of motivation. Bamber and Tett (2000) also made similar observations in their research. Those who received negative reactions from families, children or partners to their ongoing studies, or experienced significant financial difficulties, found it much harder to stay motivated to negotiate academic demands. This was also acknowledged by Mannay & Morgan (2013) in their case studies of three female mature students in HE, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. But this is not only relevant for mature students, as it is likely that younger students from low-participation groups might also experience similar negative reactions from their families.

## Conclusions

Whilst this chapter attempted to divide motivations by outcomes and intellectual stimulation, it is evident that this is too simplistic to properly understand the motivations of mature students. There appears to be a wide range of motivations mature students bring with them, both when they enrol in HE, and the motivations which drive them through to the end of their degree.

The research here suggests that traditional-aged students are more motivated by instrumental factors such as pressures from family or employment, and that mature students have a combination of instrumental and intellectual motives for engaging in HE study. Though within the mature student group, there seems to be a difference in motivation between younger and older mature students, which needs to be examined in more detail to understand why this is the case. The research discussed here also suggests that mature students tend to have more than

just one motivation for studying in HE, but also that these initial motivations might change as they progress through their degree. It would be useful to examine whether these different-aged mature students have different motivations for study, both initially and over the course of their degree. Such an examination might illustrate the impact of the decline in part-time HE and also examine if HE has a transformative effect on the motivations of mature students of all ages, or if this is only experienced by younger or older mature students.

# Chapter 5: Study Barriers for Mature Students

## Introduction

Mature students can enter HE with strong motivations to complete an undergraduate degree, as mentioned in the previous chapter, but the barriers they experience during their studies can test this motivation. It is evident that barriers tend to differ according to a student's circumstances, which inevitably change during their life course, often at certain ages (Wagner, 1989; Schuller & Watson, 2009). The patterns in life courses has evolved, due to increases in life expectancy in the West, meaning that life events such as employment, marriage and childbirth are no longer so prevalent in early adulthood (Furlong & Cartmel, 2009). Consequently, traditional-age and young mature students (21-24) might be less likely to be burdened by practical and personal responsibilities. For those mature students who do have such responsibilities, Sargant et al. (1997) maintain that adults will still access learning wherever they can, often having to engage in education which is often designed for younger students. This often means that mature students have to fit their education in with what they call a 'complex web of other demands on their time' (Sargant, et al., 1997, p. 7). Findings from research on barriers to study in HE helps in understanding how barriers affect mature students, both in terms of adapting to HE and in terms of staying motivated. The different levels of drop-out for traditional-aged and mature students (HESA, 2012), discussed in chapter 2, imply that barriers might be more pronounced for mature students, because their rate of drop-out is much higher.

This chapter will consider a range of age-related issues that appear to act as barriers for students in HE. Firstly, practical barriers such as caring and employment responsibilities will be discussed. Then the discussion will turn to personal barriers such as finances, health and attitudes.

### 5.1: Practical Barriers

As previously mentioned, responsibilities such as children and financial commitments, all still tend to come along at specific periods in a person's lifetime. However alongside this, the likelihood of caring for an elderly relative has also increased, because of increased life-expectancy. Practical barriers such as caring responsibilities and employment responsibilities make the pursuit of higher education much more difficult. Such responsibilities can impact on both attendance and completion of assignments, as students try to negotiate competing demands. Moxley et al.'s (2001) guide to keeping students in HE, maintains that students who

try to tackle competing demands in their own way might appear to be undirected and unfocussed, and this can be interpreted by universities and tutors as students failing to adhere to their demands or the demands of their degree (Sargant, et al., 1997). As a result, retention is often tied to barriers such as caring and employment responsibilities, issues which can be overlooked by HE institutions (Mannay & Morgan, 2013; Foster, 2009) and make mature students appear more of a problem (Bowl, 2003; Bowl, 2001). This section will look at how caring responsibilities and employment responsibilities impact on students during their studies.

### 5.1.1: Caring Responsibilities

Firstly, for those considering pursuit of a degree, caring responsibilities for children and others can be a major barrier both in terms of accessing HE and juggling the conflicting demands during study. Although caring responsibilities do not necessarily occur at specific ages, mature students are more likely to have caring responsibilities than traditional-age students, particularly in relation to children (Foster, 2009). However, data on the number of students with caring responsibilities appears scant, so the number of students affected by this can only be approximated.

Students living in England who are eligible for student finance can apply for a Childcare Grant which will provide up to 85% of childcare costs depending on factors such as household income, childcare cost and the number of dependent children (Gov.uk, 2017). The Parents' Learning Allowance is a grant which is available to full-time students with children, who do not qualify for the Childcare Grant. As the Student Loans Company produces statistics on people applying for funding, specific to having dependents, this can give us some idea of the number of students with caring responsibilities. Table 5.1 (Student Loans Company, 2014, p. 22+24) outlines the number of students being awarded this funding.

Table 5.1: Students awarded Grants and Loans by Student Loan Company (adapted)

Grants / Allowances	Number of Applicants Awarded (000s)		
	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
	(as at 17/11/13)	(as at 16/11/14)	(provisional) (as at 16/11/14)
<b>Parents Learning Allowance</b>	39.2	49.6	39
<b>Childcare Grant</b>	14.2	17.1	13.1
<b>Maintenance loan</b>	879.3	906.4	923.4

(Student Loans Company, 2014)



From the information in this table it is evident that, in the UK, parents form a fairly substantial body of students at between 39000 and 49000 per year in the years shown above. But this only equates to between 4-5% of the average number of applicants for maintenance loans, suggesting that parents do not tend to engage in education, as highlighted by Schuller & Watson (2009). The total number of students awarded maintenance loans has been added to provide context to the number of students who apply for funding. Those who applied for a Childcare Grant, rather than Parents' Learning Allowance, represent a smaller group of students with caring responsibilities for young children. In Table 5.1 they average 15000 applicants per year, across the three years presented, which is only 1.6% of the average number of maintenance loan applicants. Parents certainly appear to be a minority group in the student population, as the people claiming financial support because of their caring responsibilities for children equate to around 6% of students claiming for financial support. It is important to note that these figures are likely to underrepresent those with caring responsibilities, as many may choose not to apply or fail to realise that they are entitled to support. Others may not be eligible to receive such funding due to their household income. But as the number of students applying for maintenance loans also excludes self-funded students, this still gives us an idea of the proportions of students with caring responsibilities for children. Unfortunately, as there is no other source of information on this, it is not possible to compare these figures, to gain a more accurate idea. The fact that information appears not to be collected on this also suggests that being a parent is seen to be a less important issue compared to other Widening Participation categories, as also evident in the lack of information on students with caring responsibilities for adults.

To understand the nature and impact of responsibilities for caring for children, there is a fairly good range of small-scale research, but information on caring for adults is sparse. In addition, much of the literature on student responsibilities tends to be very specific to women (Burton, et al., 2011; James, et al., 2013; Mannay & Morgan, 2013), with men with caring responsibilities almost invisible as a group. This is likely to be because of the historical division of roles according to gender (Sharpe, 1994) which means that women are still largely held responsible for providing care in the family, particularly for children whilst they are young (British Social Attitudes, 2012). Provision of support for parents varies quite widely across HE providers with many pre-1992 universities failing to effectively meet their needs (McGivney, 1990).

Bowl (2001) contends that approaches looked at non-traditional students as the 'problem' in relation to mature student issues in the past, rather than examining problems within educational structures. Bowl highlights that her 32 mature, ethnic minority student participants experienced institutional barriers as they made the transition into HE much more difficult. She argues that

their gendered position as mothers resulted in them experiencing 'time poverty' (Bowl, 2001, p. 156), which she describes as being unable to dedicate as much time to their studies as other students, which was also acknowledged by Schuller and Watson (2009). Bowl contends that the combination of academic timetables and family responsibilities meant that participants knew they could not spend as much time as they would like on their studies. This meant that they had to develop strategies so that they could cope with their work, such as reading only required material and doing the minimum to pass, so they did not neglect their responsibilities for their family. This is also reflected in Gonzáles-Arnal & Kilkey's (2009) findings in respect of mature student carers. They maintain that educational policy has been designed using concepts which are based on male students, which female students then have to adapt to. As a result of this they express concern as to whether HE student funding in England can be compatible with Widening Participation goals, because they believe it centres on students who are instrumental and individualistic, which the carers in their research were not. Whilst they acknowledge that many of them had engaged with economic goals, Gonzáles-Arnal & Kilkey maintain that this was the only element of HE policy they aligned with. They explain that this is because they did not have the freedom to choose the best university or commit to study in the same way as younger students, or male students. Essentially this was due to their caring role, as in Bowls' (2001) study, because these students did not want to disrupt their children's lives or move away from older dependents (Gonzáles-Arnal & Kilkey, 2009).

So caring responsibilities for both adults and children can act as significant practical barriers to participation and success in HE Jenkins (2017) found in his research on the participation of baby boomers in midlife, that people who did not have children by age 33 were more likely to upgrade to HE rather than vocational qualifications. He contends that this may be due to the amount of time required to complete a degree, which makes it difficult for those with family commitments. This is also apparent in Mannay & Morgan's (2013) student case studies (n=4) where these female mature students' ability to succeed is directly affected by their caring responsibilities. One of these students highlighted the conflict of her caring role and being a student, dropping out as a direct result of this. Mannay and Morgan argue that this was because she felt she had lost legitimacy as a mother and wife as she was not contributing financially or spending enough time with her children or time cleaning her home (2013, p62-63). They argue that interventions designed to tackle non-traditional student drop-out needs to be based on clear understandings of the barriers these students face on a daily basis, in order to be effective. Both Mannay and Morgan and Bowl demonstrate how non-traditional students struggle to find appropriate support and guidance in HE, Bowl describing them as 'a frustrated participant in an unresponsive

institutional context' (Bowl, 2001, p. 141). Mannay and Morgan extend this by highlighting that the groupings of barriers which affect retention are often too generic to fully explain the practical and psychological conflicts that cause mature students to drop-out.

However, the assumption that young people can be completely flexible and also fit in with traditional timetabling forgets the existence of young carers, who often face more challenging practical barriers. The Carers Trust and NIACE report on Young Carers (Phelps & Aylward, 2015) considered the challenges they faced in education, whilst being unpaid carers for a member of their family or a friend with an illness, mental health condition, a disability or an addiction. They highlight that the number of total carers in the UK was rising and would increase by 60% by 2030. Before the report was written the 2011 census reported that more than 375,000 people aged 14-25 were classed as carers in the UK and this was expected to increase in line with the total numbers of carers. This increase is already evident with the Carers Trust (2018) highlighting that there are now around 700,000 young carers in the UK. Phelps and Aylward (2015) highlight the challenges these young people face in transition to further education, as well as within and beyond it, with needs similar to that of mature student carers. In their review of the research on young carers, they found that only 36% of student carers felt that they were able to balance their work, study and relationship commitments whilst at university. This is in contrast to students who did not have caring responsibilities, as over half (53%) of them felt they were able to maintain this balance.

With carers required to provide a range of support, from practical tasks (cooking, housework, shopping), physical care, managing medication, family budgets, siblings and emotional support, their caring responsibilities may unexpectedly increase, which can be very difficult to balance with educational commitments (Phelps & Aylward, 2015). Indeed, the challenges carers of all ages face, in terms of unplanned demands on their time, cannot be as easily tackled as it might for those caring for children, where timetables can generally be planned around routine. Although part-time study is often offered as a solution to practical problems caused by caring responsibilities, the HEFCE report on outcomes 2013/14 (HEFCE, 2015) highlights that graduates who studied on part-time degree courses were generally much less likely to gain a First or Second-class degree than their full-time counterparts, possibly because students who choose this route have to juggle their commitments.

As mature students are more likely to be part-time students, because of their commitments, it follows that it is likely that they might be disproportionately affected by this. The decline in part-time provision is also likely to make it even harder for mature students, who are now more likely

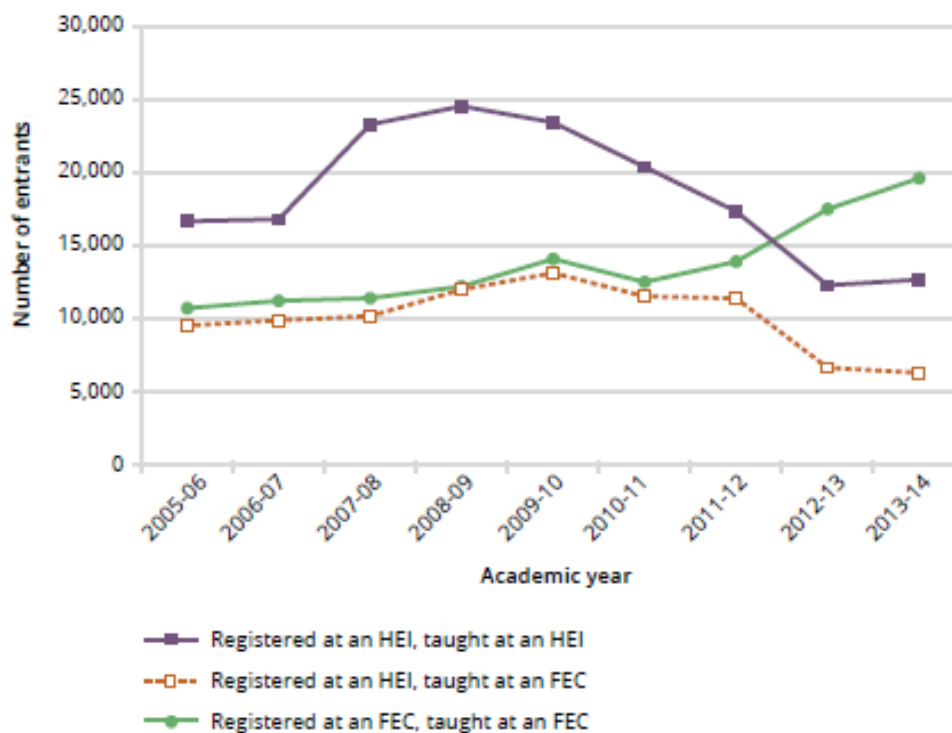
to have to study full-time. McGivney (1996) believed that mature students with caring commitments were more likely to want to study for undergraduate degrees at further education colleges because of the importance of geographical location. She also highlights that other reasons, such as feeling a fit in this environment and not having to suffer the upheaval of transition between institutions, were also important in their decisions to study HE in FE. This was also confirmed in Callender et al.'s (2014) research where student mothers enrolled, attended and performed much better than they might have done because of the close proximity of the Sure Start centre to their homes and the availability of childcare at the centre. Moxley et al. (2001, p. 34) highlight that retention is inherently linked to processes which help students to continue with their studies in HE, but that this is often related to ideas of 'match and goodness of fit'.

Indeed, McGivney (1996) states that the conflict between a caring role and a student role is one of the biggest challenges to overcome. She acknowledges the difficulties for all institutions to provide high quality, inexpensive childcare, but highlights that strategies such as this are important in supporting students with young children. Along similar lines, González-Arnal & Kilkey (2009) suggest that the need for geographically close social and family support networks is essential for mature student parents to be able to successfully access HE. This was seen to be particularly important if affordable, quality childcare provision was not available. Elliot and Brna (2009) found that 30% of their non-traditional student sample (n=605), who were described as a key target group for Widening Participation, said they were not currently considering doing a degree, but would review this decision if local provision became available. Therefore geographical barriers are also significant for those with caring responsibilities, whether for children or adults.

The recent falling numbers of part-time students enrolling in university (HEFCE, 2015) and the increasing numbers of mature students studying full-time with alternative providers (HESA, 2017), supports this view. Questionnaire research by Burton et al. (2011), conducted in an FE college with 84 mature students, shows that students' needs could be better provided for by taking a student-centred approach and by building flexibility into the teaching programme. This was facilitated by being able to have smaller groups, the proximity and the less formal nature of FE. They found that timetabling around school times and holidays meant that juggling responsibilities was less of a problem for the students in their sample. This study may be influenced by the author's involvement in teaching these courses, but the desirability of this route for students in general is also highlighted by figures on full-time entrants to undergraduate courses other than first degrees (HEFCE, 2015). Figure 5.1 below demonstrates that there was

an increase in other undergraduate courses in FE colleges in 2012-13, whilst there was a reduction in registrations at HE institutions. It is not evident whether these figures are representative of the general undergraduate population, but it is suspected that mature students and non-traditional students will be over-represented in the FE figures, because of the popularity of this route, within these groups (Burton, et al., 2011; Callender, et al., 2014). This figure demonstrates that this trend continued to 2013-14, with almost 20,000 students taught other undergraduate courses, such as foundation degrees in FE Colleges with only 13,000 in HE institutions.

Figure 5.1 UK and other EU full-time other undergraduate entrants studying at English institutions 2005-06 to 2013-14 (HEFCE, 2015)



Consequently, it is apparent that the way that many universities approach the delivery of higher education can make studying particularly difficult for non-traditional students with caring responsibilities, which is likely to challenge their motivation and their ability to adapt. This is particularly evident, because they tend to choose alternative providers who tend to make undergraduate study more flexible, such as FE colleges, the OU and Birkbeck University, in London, who deliver HE through evening classes. The demands of their student and caring role might be impossible for some students to consolidate full-time.

### 5.1.2: Employment

Paid employment has become an increasing challenge to students in the UK, as the cost of being an undergraduate has increased, affecting many more students than it would have done previously. This is particularly significant for those without the assistance of a family who can afford to support them financially whilst they pursue an undergraduate degree (Irwin, 2018; Hesketh, 1999). Term-time work has often been something associated with mature students, because they are more likely to have financial responsibilities than traditional-age students. However, paid employment has become increasingly important for traditional-aged students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, following the rise in fees.

Traditionally, mature students have tended to be more likely to need to engage in paid employment whilst studying, because of existing financial responsibilities and because of dependents. Indeed, Kearns (2014) argues that entering HE can be a risky venture for mature students, because the funding changes pose specific barriers to successful study. Busher et al.'s (2014) research with Access to HE students illustrates this. Many of the mature students (60%) required additional income in order to meet their financial responsibilities and were also juggling responsibilities such as children alongside study and their employment. Busher et al. argue that these students' personal and socio-political contexts forced them into hectic regimes, with students explaining how their 'almost impossible' schedule tires them out (2014, p. 808). However, because of the nature of FE, as demonstrated in Burton et al.'s research (2011), tutors were able to act supportively by sending information to students or contacting them when they were unable to attend. This facilitated students' study and commitments outside college (Busher, et al., 2014) because tutors understood that most of them had these commitments. In contrast, Kearns (2014) highlights that universities can be ambivalent about the range of needs of mature students. He found that some mature students could absorb the financial demands of pursuing a degree, but others had limited access to other resources, and this presented a significant barrier to their studies.

However, it is evident that the need to work whilst completing an undergraduate degree is becoming more prevalent amongst all students, not just those classed as non-traditional or mature (Christie, 2009; Manthei & Gilmore, 2005). The number of students working whilst studying in the UK was examined in a survey of 1,704 university students, by Endsleigh Insurance and the National Union of Students (Times Educational Supplement, 2013). They found that 57% of these students were in paid employment while at university, in 2013, and 55% were increasingly relying on the income from part-time work for living costs, such as accommodation, food and household bills. They also found that students' employment hours were increasing,

and that one in every two students was working more than 11 hours a week. By 2012, this had increased so that nine out of ten students were working up to 20 hours a week in 2013. Robotham (2012) found higher rates in his research with students ( $n=1,827$ ), in a large post 1992 university in the UK (mostly undergraduates), where 67% students had part-time employment during term-time with 12% having more than one job. However, Callender (2008) found in her larger-scale research that there was a variation in the proportion of students engaging in term-time employment (42% to 78%) across the six UK universities in her research.

The negative consequences of paid employment on achievement is illustrated in a range of studies. Research on both the prevalence and impact of term-time paid employment for mature students is apparent in both Gonzáles-Arnal and Kilkey's (2009) and Callender's (2008) research. Gonzáles-Arnal and Kilkey found that full-time mature students with caring responsibilities were slightly more likely (63%) to work in employment during term-time than other groups, such as the young low participation group (60%). Callender also found that students living at home with their partner and older mature students (both with and without dependent children), were most likely to work long hours (over 20 hours). Although students aged over 25 were only slightly more likely to be employed than those under 25.

In keeping with this, Gonzáles-Arnal and Kilkey (2009) also found that whilst mature students were more likely to be employed, young students were also working. They found that almost three-quarters of the mature student carers ( $n=130$ ) in their survey research engaged in paid work during term-time, though this was particularly apparent for those studying part-time (93%). The impact of term-time paid work on mature students was revealed in their qualitative research, though the impact on young students was not discussed. The employed mature students reported feeling exhausted and burnt-out because of their struggles to juggle the demands of study alongside the amount of employment they needed to complete to cope financially.

Callender (2008) also gives us some general insight into the impact of working on students' grades in HE, though the age of students is not detailed. She surveyed students ( $n=1012$ ) from six UK universities and used institutional data on their grades. She found that there was a notable difference in the degree outcomes of students in paid employment. Through statistical modelling she explored the overall relationship between students' working hours and grades (including entry qualifications, gender, subject and their age) and found that the more hours a student works the worse their grades are. As she found that older students worked longer hours, this suggests that mature students are more likely to be detrimentally affected by their

employment. Salamonson and Andrews' (2006) research on nursing students (n=250) in Australia, Salmonson et al.'s (2012) longitudinal research with 566 nursing students, and Dennis et al.'s (2018) research with undergraduates at Aberdeen University (n=1652), also found that the number of hours spent in employment was negatively associated with academic performance. However, this may be a proxy for economic background or intelligence, as Dennis et al. (2018) found that only participants in low skilled employment performed worse than students who did not have term-time employment. Participants who engaged in skilled or employment classed as other performed better academically (almost 7% higher grades) than students who were not employed during term-time. Callender (2008) also found that students with lower entry grades were more likely to work long hours and be over-represented in the lower socio-economic group. This suggests that as mature students and students from lower socio-economic groups are more likely to need paid employment, it may be more of a barrier for them, because they work longer hours.

Strategies that appear to help reduce the impact of employment barriers can come from employers and from within institutions. Busher et al. (2014) found that sympathetic employers converted full-time jobs into part-time jobs, let students work flexibly around term-times or reduced working hours to ease the pressure on these students. They also noted that the support and understanding of tutors in FE was important in helping students to juggle employment responsibilities. It is argued that the practical barriers that are often affected by age may be overcome by the use of technology. For example, Rawe (2013) considers technology beneficial for adult students because they often have competing priorities alongside study, such as work, providing for family and commuting. She highlights that engaging the student is even more challenging for educators, because of this, so emerging technology can remove the practical barriers in accessing education by providing remote access. Dennis et al.'s (2018) findings support this, as students suggested that accessing recorded lectures would help them to overcome the barriers that paid employment presented to attendance. Edirisingha (2009) also showed that learning technology, which was introduced to mature students prior to starting university, was effective both as a discussion tool and as a support mechanism for accessing learning resources. As well as giving students the resources to pursue and catch up on their studies remotely, this was seen to increase confidence in accessing learning resources as well as helping resolve fears of fitting in at university (as discussed in Chapter 3). Although this programme was a small-scale pilot, largely used by nursing students, it suggests that technology can bridge the gap created by the demands of employment to some degree, as also recommended by Rawe and Dennis et al. But Gorard suggests that attempts to support students,



such as this, are not sensitive enough to age. He argues that one-size fits all technological approaches designed to enable students to access course materials may not work for older learners who may not use technology regularly:

‘What appears to be ignored in this plan is that access to the relevant technology and expertise is unevenly distributed in society, and that those without access are also more likely to be those currently not participating in more traditional episodes’ (Gorard, 2002, p. 129).

Attempts to support students with employment conflicts or other responsibilities may need to be better designed to ensure they actually benefit students of all ages, as well as those with differing access to such support.

The positive effects of being involved in employment do not appear to have been acknowledged in much of the literature on this topic, but Robotham (2012) highlights a number of positive outcomes from employment reported by students. Improving students’ ability to deal and communicate with people, develop confidence and team working skills were indicated as important benefits gained from involvement in paid employment. The negatives most commonly reported were less time for social activities followed by less time for reading and studying. This links with both Manthei and Gilmore’s (2005) and Busher et al.’s (2014) findings on the limitations of time. But again the focus here on mature students may be somewhat short-sighted, as those citing concerns about losing their social life may be more likely to be traditional-age students, considering the lack of these issues being reported in mature student studies (Kearns, 2014; Burton, et al., 2011). This is difficult to evidence, however, as information demonstrating age-related patterns of employment in the wider student body is limited. The need to work may be more acute for traditional-age students from lower-income households, which Reay (2015) considered in her critical piece on the Oxbridge ban on term-time working. In addition, class, gender and ethnic group may also factor into individual experiences of juggling financial demands whilst in HE (Mannay & Morgan, 2013). Hinton-Smith (2012) discusses the barriers that paid employment presents for students who are lone parents. She highlights that juggling study, childcare responsibilities and the demands of employment alone presents an almost unsurmountable barrier. Gonzáles-Arnal & Kilkey (2009) also note the high proportion of mature student carers in their research who engaged in term-time paid work and the possible detrimental consequences, with one student feeling so burnt out that they had to leave work and resort to a hardship loan fund.

With this research demonstrating that a large proportion of the student population increasingly requires paid employment for basic financial needs, it is critical to remember that individual

circumstances dictate the degree of need for involvement in paid employment, which can vary quite widely. Therefore, age may no longer be a defining factor, as it would have been, prior to the hike in the cost of fees. More worryingly, the stress that can accompany working alongside study is hinted at throughout this literature (Busher, et al., 2014; Hinton-Smith, 2012; Kearns, 2014) having diverse consequences. Robotham (2012) found that, whilst 28% of the students in his research felt combining employment and study made them more able to cope with stress, another 28% believed it reduced their ability to cope with stress. He raises concerns about how the continued growth in student employment might impact on the mental health of the student population, because of this.

## 5.2: Personal Barriers

Personal barriers can be much more wide-ranging, because of the different background students come from. They are also less predictable as personal barriers can have both short and long-term effects on students' experiences, unlike practical barriers that can be easier to organise study around, because they tend to be more uniform. Personal barriers may become more complex for mature students, because they seem more affected by these issues, than traditional-age students. Therefore, personal difficulties with finances and health will be discussed in the next section.

### 5.2.1 Financial Barriers

Although financial issues tend to cross-over with some of the issues discussed in the previous section on childcare and employment, decisions to participate and continue in HE are often informed by financial issues. As traditional-age students have less experience of independent living they are less likely to start university with debt, but as they have less experience of managing money, they might be more at risk of experiencing financial problems whilst at university. However, mature students seem to, again, dominate the discussion in the literature.

The barriers that finances present to mature student carers are discussed in some detail by Gonzáles-Arnal and Kilkey (2009). Survey findings revealed that the mature student carers in their survey (n=130) were more likely to report having financial difficulties than any other group of students (40%). They reported having some or a lot of financial difficulties with their regular financial commitments, in contrast to only 27% of students from the young widening-participation group and only 23% from the non-widening-participation group. Interviews indicated that stresses over financial issues were often made much worse because of responsibilities for others, such as children who needed paid childcare.

González-Arnal & Kilkey (2009) also discuss that, whilst some students had partners to support them, being classed as students often led to them experiencing issues in terms of receiving their entitlement to benefits, because their changed status meant they were now entitled to loans. These financial difficulties were seen to affect students' ability to complete course requirements and attendance, making it difficult for them to succeed academically in HE. For students who had considered leaving their courses, money worries were cited as the most common reason for mature student carers (57%) and this was reported more often by this group than for any other group of students.

Elliot & Brna's (2009) research also highlights how decisions about engaging in education can be affected by the financial situation of non-traditional learners, which echoes the issues discussed in the employment section (Callender, 2008; Dennis, et al., 2018). Their research with FE college students (n=605) highlighted that for students with considerable personal commitments, what they studied, where and when they were able to study were primary considerations because of finances and responsibilities. The influence of finances on decision-making was evident in the most common reasons selected for not wanting to pursue a degree. Over half of the reasons students gave for not being able to progress to HE were financial, with 27% citing 'securing employment' and 26% citing financial or 'money issues'. Human capital theory, discussed in the policy chapter, appears to be relevant to these research findings with students debating the perceived costs against the benefits of doing a degree, which was critical in their decision-making process: *"I have to get some balance between how much education I need and can afford"* (Elliot & Brna, 2009, p. 113).

Their findings also match up well with other research from FE, such as Busher et al. (2014) who found that mature students struggled financially, and Burton, et al. (2011) who found that financial barriers were not significant for students when bursaries and grants were available. Whilst these pieces of research looked at students in FE colleges, they also relate to research on undergraduates such as Callender (2008) and Dennis et al. (2018) who both found that mature students and those from lower socio-economic groups struggled financially, needing to engage in paid employment. Callender (2008, p. 368) found that 61% of students who worked constantly struggled to meet financial commitments with 92% of this group earning 'for basic essentials'. Dennis et al. (2018) had similar findings at the University of Aberdeen, though only 71% of employed students worked for essential living expenses (rent, food, bills, supporting, family members). This might reflect the variation Callender found across the pre-1992 and post-1992 universities, possibly because post-1992 institutions tend to recruit more WP students, as discussed in the Policy and Participation chapter.

### 5.2.2 Health Issues

Health barriers, though not specifically age dependent, can mean that students have to put off education at traditional ages (Moxley, et al., 2001). They can have a significant impact on students' engagement and experiences in education. McGivney (1996) highlights that students with disabilities and special needs experience specific pressures and difficulties, which are often due to social pressures as well as a lack of support. Although many studies combine the experiences of people suffering from mental and physical health issues, they will be considered separately here. This is because it is important to consider the differing influence they might have on students' studies.

Since McGivney wrote her comments, sufficient time has passed for the Disability Discrimination Act, launched in 1995, to take effect. As this act was designed to make discrimination because of disability unlawful, Manfield et al. (2002, p. 10) argue that, in theory HE should now be a much more level playing field:

'The Disability Discrimination Act (1995) puts a much clearer responsibility on education institutions not to discriminate against students with disabilities and to avoid their unlawful exclusion. Particularly welcome is the requirement under the Disability Discrimination Act for education institutions to anticipate the needs of disabled students in all areas of planning and delivery of education.'

Whether this legislation has been successful in reducing the problems students might face in HE will be discussed in this section. Firstly, we will consider mental health barriers and then physical health barriers to also understand whether students might be more affected by these barriers at particular ages.

#### 5.2.2.1 Mental Health

Research on students' mental health is slowly developing, but there appears to be only a few pieces of research that have looked at this issue in the UK. The National Union of Students (NUS) recently focussed large-scale research onto students' mental health, because mental health issues are increasing amongst young people in HE. Their findings highlight that students aged 18-20 are less likely to have been formally diagnosed with a mental health problem (NUS Services Limited, 2013). Of the 1,200 students surveyed 20% indicated that they had a mental health problem, 33% per cent had suicidal thoughts and 33% would not know where to access support. Academic pressures were the biggest triggers of severe mental health problems. In a later piece of research, they surveyed over 1000 students, of all ages, on experiences of mental health issues (NUS, 2015) and 78% highlighted that they had experienced mental difficulties (diagnosed and undiagnosed) in the last year. In her presentation, Maddy Kirkman, Disabled

Students Officer for the National Union of Students NUS, claimed that there were particular challenges for students in this respect. Younger students were highlighted as a concern because they experienced a significant transition from one institution to another and many aspects of their lives changing during this time. For those young students who had pre-existing mental health problems the impact of moving from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) to adult mental health services (AHMS), as well as often having to navigate support services in a new geographical area, presented significant challenges (NUS, 2015).

These patterns are also confirmed by the Equality Challenge Unit's report (2014) on supporting staff and students experiencing mental health difficulties. They state that in 2013 around 1 in every 125 students in UK HE institutions (0.8%) disclosed that they had a 'mental health condition' to their university. The authors note that this figure is significantly lower than the national mental health figures, which reports that 1 in 4 adults experiences mental illness at some point in their lifetime, and 1 in 6 experience symptoms at any one time. They suggest that this discrepancy may be due to students failing to disclose mental health issues. In their research of 1442 students in a cross-section of universities, they found that 75% of students who had experienced mental health difficulties, whilst studying, disclosed this to fellow students. Those who did not largely put this down to 'not wanting students to think less of them' (Equality Challenge Unit, 2014, p. 5). Of those who did disclose to other students, they found them to be largely supportive (78%) with only 7% finding other students to be unsupportive or very unsupportive after they had disclosed their illness (Equality Challenge Unit, 2014, p. 14). Only 46% of the students experiencing problems received support and adjustments from their institution and only 58% had actually disclosed their condition in order to receive support. For the significant number of those who failed to disclose their illness, the main reasons given for this were feeling that they would be treated unfairly or that they would not actually receive any support.

Whilst the Equality Challenge research (2014) is revealing, they cover a limited range of universities and seem to only skim a small selection of students experiencing mental health issues within these institutions. The authors acknowledge that the difficulty they faced in their research is a difficulty also faced by universities, as mental health figures do not indicate the true size of the problem to assist them in developing appropriate resources. The age of students is not mentioned in the Equality Challenge research (2014), but the significance of age and mental health in HE is explained in Moxley et al.'s (2001) illustrative case of a mature student with pre-existing mental health issues. The example of Christopher's case shows how institutions can expect students to fit in to their environment, not fitting around students' needs

(Piaget, 1936). This was also mentioned in the Equality Challenge research (2014) as a problem for students with mental health problems, more generally, who felt like a problem needing to be fixed. Like a number of mature students, Christopher was initially a promising student who failed to succeed in a university environment at a traditional age, because of an episode of mental illness which dominated his life until his mid-30s. Moxley et al. (2001) maintain that if individuals are written off, told not to expect too much from life by mental health services, attitudes that mirror this within university can mean students struggle to gain the confidence to persist with study. The expectation that students fit to the HE environment may also result in additional struggles with adaptation, because of the very specific individual needs that often accompany mental health issues. Failing to properly engage and support individuals who have already experienced mental illness often results in untapped potential and a lifetime of unequal opportunities, for these individuals.

In addition, Moxley et al. (2001) suggest that the independent learning often expected in a university environment can often exacerbate mental health issues, with students becoming isolated and detached. This links with the negative experiences students reported in relation to the HE environment, in the Equality Challenge study (2014) where open plan study areas in libraries increased anxiety and open plan support services caused anxiety and stigma. Feelings of guilt, because of needing and receiving extra support, were also highlighted as negative issues in this research, alongside the additional pressure of accessing support.

As well as mental health issues causing a delay in people entering university, there is also evidence that younger students may be more susceptible to developing mental health problems once they are engaged in study within HE. Macaskel's cross-sectional study (2012) of first, second and third year students (n=1197) in a single UK university, for example, suggests that age might be a significant factor because of a peak in mental health issues in the university population at 17-24 years. She argues that the rapid growth in numbers of students alongside cuts in university funding mean that some of the protective factors have been removed, resulting in a detrimental change in student experience. Increasing demands on academics mean that they are unable to provide personal support and students can also find it more difficult to make friends to develop a sense of belonging, because they are increasingly taught in larger groups, which results in further isolation.

Macaskel's (2012) research highlights that mental health issues become heightened during the Second Year, with 12.9% participants classed as psychiatric caseness on entry, rising to 23.1% during the middle of the Second Year and 18.6% in the middle of the Third Year. In terms of

treatment, 4% were receiving treatment at entry, 6.5% in the Second Year and 5.3% in the Third Year. Anxiety was cited as a more common issue than depression, amongst those reporting mental health problems. This is possibly due to increased pressure during the Second Year, with students often moving into private rented accommodation alongside the pressure of maintaining a higher standard of work, because all grades are often included in the final calculation of degree classification. Macaskel also believes that realisation of the gravity of debt might affect students during this Second Year, which might also explain these figures.

The lack of small-scale evidence in this area means that it is difficult to understand different-aged students' experiences and the nature of the barriers they face in HE. It would be interesting to consider how mental health issues impact on experiences and whether younger students are more or less resilient than mature students in coping with such challenges. Also, if mature students are more likely to experience mental health problems because of pre-existing conditions, this presents even greater barriers to social and environmental adaptation, because they also have to deal with the issues created by their difference in age.

#### 5.2.2.2 Disabilities

As with mental health, the difficulties for students suffering from impairments and ill health can be complex and experiences can vary widely. Official statistics and academic research tend to focus on students with physical impairments and learning disabilities, but not to include people with serious debilitating health conditions such as asthma, epilepsy, diabetes (Shevlin, et al., 2004). Mental health problems are also often included in disability statistics. This means that only a partial understanding of the barriers caused by a student's physical health can be gained. Whilst the physical health of students is not directly affected by age, the instances of health problems and impairments tend to increase as people age. As with mental health, delayed engagement in HE may also be affected by a person's earlier experiences of health problems, though research on this has been difficult to locate. However, the double bind that mature students may experience if they also have disabilities was highlighted by McGivney (1996), just after the Disability Discrimination Act was introduced in 1995, as she maintained that some universities at the time did not have the right equipment or environments to make learning accessible for all. In addition, she highlighted the impact on disabled students' experiences at university when there was an absence of training for university staff, both in terms of awareness and support strategies. Unfortunately, there are still a lot of changes needed in HE to properly support disabled students, over twenty years after the Disability Discrimination Act. The progress made by HE providers in respect of supporting disabled students was considered in a report commissioned by HEFCE, in 2016/17 (Williams, et al., 2017). They found that only 52%

of HE providers had an accessibility plan, only 38% had almost fully accessible teaching and learning facilities and 47% had almost achieved fully accessible social and recreational space. It was also apparent that larger and high tariff institutions were less likely to have fully accessible campuses though they argued that institutions were working hard towards making their campuses inclusive and accessible.

To understand how disability and impairment affect access and engagement in education, figures show that disabled people are around half as likely to hold a degree-level qualification than non-disabled people, with 14.9% disabled people of working age holding degree-level qualifications compared with 28.1% of non-disabled people of working age (Department for Work and Pensions and Office for Disability Issues, 2014). Longitudinal research demonstrates that those with long-term impairments experience barriers to education and training because of their health, whereas those who experienced impairments in only one or two of the research waves felt they were only barred from education and training because of financial reasons, the same reasons cited by those who had no impairments (Office for National Statistics, 2015). It was acknowledged that the influence of the economic downturn at this time may have manipulated findings, to some degree.

UK Higher Educational policy has tried to reduce the financial barriers affecting students through the introduction of the Disabled Student Allowance (DSA). Riddle and Weedon (2014) believe that this financial incentive may account for the increased number of students disclosing impairments over the past decade, which has almost doubled (1994-5 3.5%, 2002-3 6%). Within universities, HESA (2016) report that, in 2014/15, 7% of total students were in receipt of the Disabled Student Allowance. They underline that this is less than those declaring disability on enrolment, but believe this to be a more reliable indicator. This is problematic, because students are known to under-report impairment for a range of reasons (Riddell & Weedon, 2014), as with disclosure of mental health issues. It also ignores those students who do not apply for the allowance, either because they feel they do not need it, or because they are not aware of their entitlement (Goode, 2007). Fuller et al.'s (2004) research on self-reported disabled students found that, of the students surveyed, 10% identified as disabled, but most with dyslexia (35%) and unseen disabilities such as epilepsy, diabetes, asthma (34%) which is higher than the national average reported by HEFCE for that year (2002).

Riddle and Weedon (2014) argue that identity issues continue to be a problem for disabled people as they often reject the disabled or impaired label, because of negative past experiences and the label's association with a 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1990). They highlight that some



progress has been made in increasing acceptance of people with disabilities by encouraging people with impairments to group together, to maximise their political presence. Not only does this pressurise students in education to try to pass as non-disabled, wherever possible, but it particularly affects those pursuing careers such as nursing, midwifery, teaching and social work, where there are fitness to practise standards (Riddell & Weedon, 2014). Riddle and Weedon's case study example of a mature teaching student demonstrates the detrimental impact of disclosure of a hidden impairment. When she informed her practice teacher about her dyslexia, in her first placement, she describes how her confidence was undermined when her capability was continually questioned. This experience and some of the attitudes of lecturers somewhat mirrors her earlier negative experiences in school, where the stigma of difficulties in spelling and grammar meant even her teachers helped her hide her need for remedial support. Riddle and Weedon (2014, p. 42) emphasise the importance of such examples, stating:

'The experiences of students with hidden impairments is particularly important, since they represent by far the largest group of disabled students, and, precisely because of the invisibility of their condition, have to face dilemmas in relation to disclosure at many points in their personal and professional lives'.

Pollack (2012) also echoes age-related issues for dyslexic students as she maintains younger students have successful role models, who are open about being dyslexic, but older students are much more negative about being dyslexic, often scarred by difficulties experienced in school.

However, it is evident that it is not only people with hidden impairments that do not want to disclose them. Goode (2007) and Shevlin et al. (2004) found that students' approaches to disclosing their disability were informed by previous experience or their awareness of the potential for discrimination as a result of disclosure. Goode (2007, p. 44) cites examples of students having less energy to 'do battle' alongside existing physical and psychological hurdles, with several coming close to dropping out. Shevlin et al. (2004) also illustrate how students with a range of impairments used enormous amounts of time and energy to negotiate access to buildings, or essential resources such as lecture notes or note-takers, frequently encountering hostility and suspicion from lecturers.

Accessing support also remains a significant obstacle for students with disabilities, which again may disproportionately affect students who have had a gap in their educational career. For example, Goode's (2007) study, which considered the aids and the obstacles to creating an inclusive learning environment within a university, discovered that the accessibility of information was often overestimated by this institution. This led to unrealistic assumptions about students being able to seek support, particularly for some young 'first generation'

students and 'mature' students who had little prior knowledge of university. For example, students did not anticipate having mobility problems, because they assumed lectures and seminars would take place in the department environment where they had been interviewed.

Whilst many of these research findings are from small-scale studies, there are many parallels to Fuller et al.'s (2004) larger-scale research, with 173 disabled students, although this is again limited by the single university focus. Their survey showed that 44% of students reported experiencing barriers in lectures, 22% barriers in other on-campus classes and 21% off-campus barriers, with partial or complete lack of access to sites given as the most common reason, though being unable to make on-the-spot field notes and carrying equipment were also common issues. Barriers in completing assessments were also reported with 34% experiencing coursework barriers, 30% barriers in exams and 12% experiencing difficulties in aural assessments. This provides more detail to help understand these issues which were also identified in the report commissioned by HEFCE (Williams, et al., 2017).

Nonetheless, the literature discussed here on both mental health barriers and physical health barriers presents these as a significant challenge to students, who may be unable to access HE, or achieve their full potential within HE. Whilst themes are apparent, the degree to which age affects this is still largely unclear, as this literature is yet to be developed sufficiently to understand resulting patterns and experiences in detail.

## Conclusions

The literature here presents a good overview of how both practical barriers and personal barriers can make the pursuit of education much harder for mature students. Whilst fees have inevitably had an impact on mature students' decisions to participate, as well as on students' financial situations, it would be useful to understand how experiences of paid employment vary within the mature student group and how traditional-age students' experiences compare. It would also be useful to gain some insight into the experiences of carers in HE, to see if caring limits the adaptation and motivation of students across all the age groups. As the research on student mental health seems to lack the detail of lived experience, for both traditional-age and mature students in HE, this means that our understanding of barriers in this respect is limited. Therefore, a focus on experiences of mental health issues would be useful in helping to understand if particular age groups of students are more effected by mental health barriers.

As a result, it is important to consider how barriers affect mature and traditional-aged students in a more detailed analysis, but also to consider whether these barriers change or lessen as mature students progress through their degree.

# Chapter 6: Methods

## Introduction

The principal aim of this study was to examine the differences in mature students' and traditional-aged students' experiences in HE. The research questions were developed using the literature on three themes: the process of adaptation, student motivations, and study barriers. By examining mature students' experiences in the same environment as traditional-age students, I felt it would be possible to see whether mature student adaptation, motivation and barriers varied by age.

This research took a longitudinal, mixed methods, case study approach, which concentrated on one cohort of students at a single university, during the first two years of their degree. The research questions were constructed around the three themes to help to capture a comprehensive picture of students' experiences.

This chapter will first outline the research questions and then look at different elements of the research design including: the population of interest, the methods of data collection, theoretical considerations, ethics, the pilot study and analysis. Subsequently, the collection and analysis of data will be explained and, finally, the practical implications of these choices will be discussed to evaluate the effectiveness of the research.

## 6.1: Research Questions

The primary research question for this research was:

- Does a mature student's age negatively affect their experiences as an undergraduate, in Higher Education?

My population of interest was UK undergraduate students studying on a full-time undergraduate degree and, for practical reasons, the sample was taken from a single UK university. As outlined in the previous chapters, these more specific research questions formed the basis of this investigation:

- Do mature students adapt differently to university life and if so, why is this the case?
- Do mature students have different motivations for study and if so, why is this the case?
- Do mature students face different barriers to study and how might these differ?

The longitudinal element of the research was considered by asking the question:

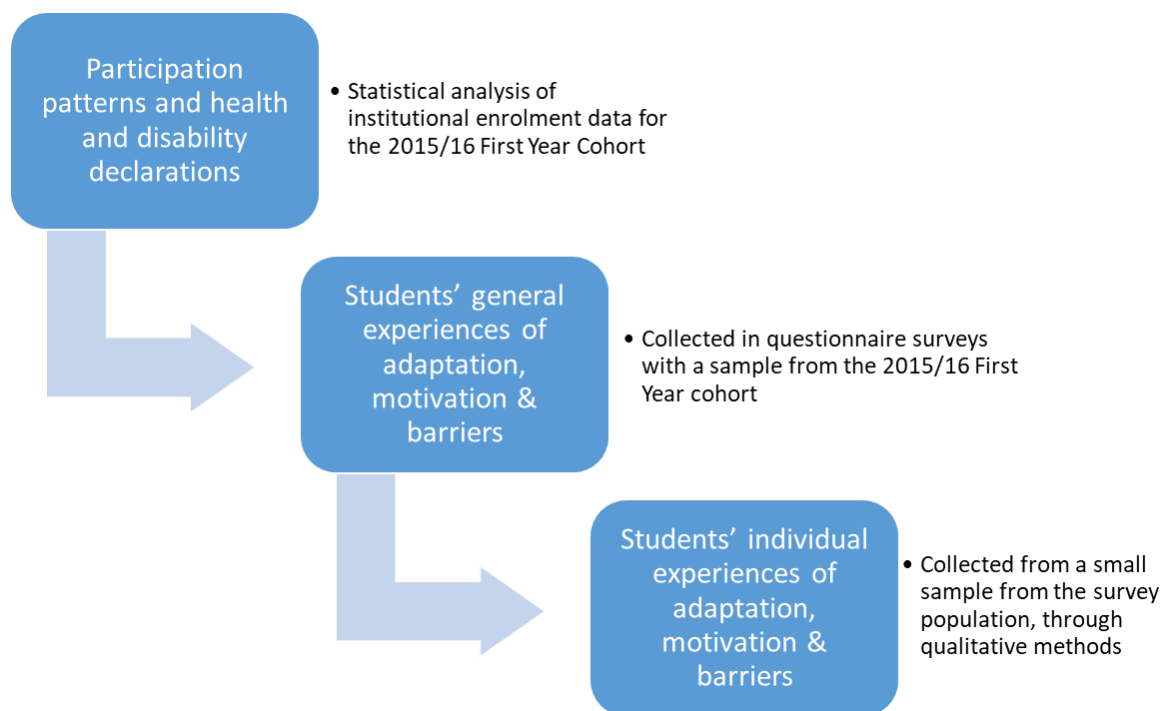
- Do barriers, motivations and adaptation techniques change over the course of their undergraduate degrees?

I aimed to collect primary data through surveys, as well as small-scale qualitative research with students, to answer these more specific research questions.

## 6.2: Research Design

The research was designed as a longitudinal, mixed methods, university case study. To examine the detail of similarities and differences in experience, according to age, this research focussed on the views and experiences of a single cohort of full-time undergraduate students. The research ran throughout the first two years of their degrees. Figure 6.1 specifies the different levels of analysis that were used to give this research both context and detail:

Figure 6.1: Levels of data analysis



A detailed understanding of age-related differences in experiences, within a university setting, was seen to be useful in identifying the issues affecting mature students in comparison to traditional-age students. By looking not only at the mature student group, as in previous research (Burton, et al., 2011; Elliot & Brna , 2009; Mannay & Morgan, 2013), but by also collecting data from the traditional-age students in this cohort it was felt that meaningful comparisons could be made.

### 6.2.1: The Population: Full-time Undergraduates at the Case Study Institution

The university which is the subject of this research is a pre-1992 institution based in the Midlands of England. This university has a cross-section of traditional academic subjects and was ranked in the top 25 universities in the Times Good University Guide at the time this research took place. It has an active Widening Participation department and employs a full-time mature student officer, to encourage mature students to apply (through outreach activities) and to organise supportive activities for enrolled mature students.

The institution was chosen for two reasons: Firstly, it was the most practical place to collect research because I was employed at this institution. Secondly, because I was employed at this university it meant that it would be much easier to access student enrolment records, with details on the population, and gain access to groups of students, than it would have been if I had chosen another institution.

One of the primary concerns about this institution, which was confirmed once enrolment figures were consulted, was that there were limited numbers of mature students on full-time undergraduate programmes. This was also seen as an opportunity in a similar way to Christie et al's (2008) research, because it presented mature students in an environment where they were a particular minority group, particularly as most mature student research concentrates on post-1992 institutions (Reay, 2004; Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). However, because it might be difficult to recruit mature students, with so few enrolled, a back-up plan was built into the research to do a comparative study with a post-1992 university, in the locality, if numbers from different age groups were too low. It was evident from the HESA data (HESA, 2012; HESA, 2016) that this other university generally had larger numbers of mature students. Again, the practical problems associated with this back up plan were acknowledged, so it was hoped that this approach would not be needed.

### 6.2.2: Methods

The decision to use a combination of methods in the research design was seen to be essential in considering the full picture of student experience, according to age.

As previously mentioned, a mixture of methods was chosen for this research which were seen to be complementary in extending and cross-referencing the findings across the sources of data (Johnson & Turner, 2003). As time and resources were restricted, the use of a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods meant that I could collect and analyse information from a large number of traditional-aged and mature students on their experiences of adaptation,

motivation and barriers, and then use the detailed accounts from qualitative methods to explain these representative patterns.

Also, generalizable differences from within the mature student age group could be controlled for, by collecting both large and small-scale data, as previous research often only uses qualitative methods (Bowl, 2001; Hinton-Smith, 2012; Reay, et al., 2010). The use of some large-scale secondary data, alongside primary quantitative and qualitative data, from the same cohort, in this university, was intended to work towards 'completeness' (Bryman, 2008, p. 91), so that the wider context of the whole cohort population could be included. Enrolment data was used to examine patterns of participation by age, as well as by other background characteristics, for context. It was also used to examine health and disability declarations by age, to understand whether certain ages of mature student, in this cohort, were more likely to experience health and disability barriers than other age groups of mature students, and also compared to the traditional-age students in this cohort. Bryman (2008) explains that many mixed method researchers use it to make research more comprehensive, rather than using qualitative or quantitative methods alone. He also suggests that different methods can be used to help offset the limitations of these approaches (Bryman, 2012). For example, whilst quantitative surveys can access a large number of responses, they can rarely provide the detail that helps us explain phenomena. In the same way, qualitative methods can highlight in-depth data that can help to explain individuals' experiences, but there are rarely enough participants to be able to draw generalisable conclusions. By using mixed methods, patterns and individual experiences can be combined to thoroughly assess how a mature student's age affects their experiences on an undergraduate degree.

As well as giving me a useful point of reference when considering how to stratify the population to gain the best sample group for comparison by age, this contextual information formed a good basis for understanding both survey data, and data from small-scale interviews and diaries. Surveys were used to collect information from the students examining specific issues highlighted in the literature relating to adaptation, motivations and barriers. Johnson and Turner (2003) emphasise that surveys are an inexpensive and quick way of eliciting information from research participants and have the benefit of being perceived as more anonymous by participants than other forms of data collection. The challenges of using questionnaire surveys are the potential for non-response (Bryman, 2012; Johnson & Turner, 2003) and the tendency for researchers to over-promise the potential generalisability of the results from surveys (Bryman, 2012).

Initially, focus groups, with a small proportion of the survey sample, were intended as the best qualitative method for collecting students' first-hand experiences of adaptation, motivation and barriers. This was because they appeared to be a more enjoyable way of exploring ideas and considering similarities and differences in experience (Johnson & Turner, 2003) and gave the participants more control over the direction of discussion (Bryman, 2012). I then intended to supplement these focus groups with electronic diaries for each participant, to enable them to discuss their personal experiences in more detail (Kearns, 2014). However, once these methods were piloted, it became apparent that focus groups would be problematic for this research (see 6.3.5 for more detail), and because it was not possible to form natural groups at the start of the students' first year, this meant that organising the groups (Bryman, 2012) and moderating discussions (Johnson & Turner, 2003) would be difficult. Therefore, interviews were chosen as an alternative to focus groups, alongside the electronic diaries, which had worked well in the pilot. The potential benefits of in-depth discussion and increased chances of response (Johnson & Turner, 2003) made it an attractive alternative method. This was designed to build on the findings of the surveys, so that the lived experiences of adaptation, motivation and barriers could explain larger-scale findings.

By using large scale data analysed alongside case study data, I hoped to provide a wider picture of how age impacts on mature student experiences in Higher Education. Secondary data is a reliable and efficient source of information, as it was not feasible for me to collect such a large quantity of data in a limited time frame, and there was no point me collecting information had already been collected by the case study university (Bryman, 2012; Lee, 2000). It was hoped that my mixed method, case study approach should be helpful in gaining both the breadth and depth of students' experiences (Bell, 1999), and meet the different demands of academics, policy-makers and practitioners (Denscombe, 2002), to establish the usefulness of this PhD thesis. As the qualitative element was longitudinal it was hoped that the originality of this proposal would make it appealing to educational professionals both within and outside of the case study university. I also believed that, by using both qualitative and quantitative data, conclusions were more versatile, as the confidence associated with information from large scale datasets, combined with the depth of experience in interviews and diaries, provided a rich source of information on the impact age had on experiences in HE

### 6.2.3: Theoretical Approach

A range of research philosophies were considered for this mixed-method investigation. However, whilst mixed-methods were chosen to give this research both context and detail, selecting an appropriate paradigm seemed problematic, initially. It appeared that there was a



split in the philosophical preference of both the potential audience and in previous research which generally took either a quantitative or a qualitative approach. Policy-makers seemed to err towards positivist approaches to research (Gorard, et al., 2007) and academia appeared to be divided between those taking a positivist approach with large-scale research and those taking an interpretative approach to small-scale research (Pring, 2010; Bryman, 2006). Therefore, the quantitative findings from this mixed methods research would satisfy some parties and the qualitative findings would satisfy others, but more importantly the combination of methods could provide a more complete picture of mature student experience. However, selecting an appropriate paradigm for both approaches was a challenge.

A combination of theoretical approaches was considered first. Positivism seemed a natural choice in relation to the quantitative element of the research. This was because this approach lends an air of reliability and validity to educational research, due to its links with the dominant ideology of natural science (Hagstrom, 1965). In the United States, for example, the 'no child left behind' federal bill suggested only positivist research will do (Matthews, 2004). This has also been echoed in Britain, where policy-makers attempted to introduce quantitative standards for the conduct of investigations (Bryman, 2006). Even within the social sciences, there appears to have been a move towards quantitative methods, as Babones (2015) highlights that the 2010 ESRC International Benchmarking Review of Sociology highlighted a major deficiency because quantitative methods were often neglected in research. He suggests that underneath this push for a more quantitative sociology is a preference for a positivist, more scientific and analytical social science. Though, even within natural science, the objective standpoint taken in positivist research is questioned as to whether it is an effective method for extracting truth (Baert, 2005). Babones (2015) also highlights that taking this approach in social research can lead to sterile investigations, which can be inappropriate for sociological research environments.

As the detail of individual experiences in the interviews and diary entries could only be properly understood through subjective analysis and the appreciation of context (Morgan, 2014), interpretive approaches were considered for this part of the research. Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie (2015, p. 93) contend that phenomenology is compatible with deductive approaches, because its founders, Husserl & Heidegger, had an appreciation of the importance of both object and subject due to their mathematical backgrounds, with logic being a key consideration. Consequently, as phenomenology combines subjective and objective approaches it was believed that this could be effectively used in this analysis, alongside a positivist approach. However, the lack of proven effective use of combined philosophies was concerning, particularly for a new researcher approaching research design. Some criticism suggested that this was not a strong

basis for research such as this, as Kelle (2005) maintains that it is not enough to integrate qualitative and quantitative methods purely because of chosen methodological models and epistemological considerations. He argues that theoretical considerations relating to the social processes being investigated must be the priority for choosing methods:

‘the best way to obtain valid explanations of social phenomena is by combining quantitative survey technology on the one hand and ethnographic investigations into the structures of meanings and local knowledge in limited cultural settings on the other... sociologists who do not wish to give up claims to understand and explain macrosocial phenomena are well-advised not to invest too much effort in methodological warfare but to make intensive use of the richness of differing methodological traditions’ (Kelle, 2005, p. 115).

The educational examples Kelle uses to demonstrate his support for using mixed methods, and multiple methodologies to triangulate research, is particularly convincing in terms of examining student motivations and reasoning processes.

James et al.’s (2013) research is a good example of the use of triangulation: their use of surveys and focus group research with Access to HE students and tutors used grounded theory alongside a hermeneutic approach to analysis. However, it was apparent that my research lacked some of the key features of James et al.’s project: notably the lack of a team of researchers and the absence of a third method of research. Denzin (1978) argues that triangulated research should have a team of researchers and that it should use methods that consider phenomena from different viewpoints, such as observation, interview, and survey: “By combining multiple observers, theories, methods and data sources, sociologists can hope to overcome the intrinsic bias that comes from single-method, single-observer, single-theory studies” (Denzin, 1978, p. 307). Unlike James et al.’s (2013) research, it was not possible for me to take a team approach, because I was a lone researcher. Also, as all forms of data were being collected from a student viewpoint, unlike in James et al.’s research, where tutors’ views were also collected, it was felt that this would not be an appropriate approach for this research.

In essence, whilst I accepted that it was important to consider the community who would consume the research findings, the most imperative factors were seen as matter being investigated (Hammersley, 2002), the population under investigation, what was being investigated in this population and where this took place (Gorade & Taylor, 2004). Indeed Denscombe (2002, p. 23) maintains that practical considerations often help to lead decision-making on research design and theoretical approach:

‘social research has moved to a position where, though they might feel more at home and more comfortable with one position rather than the other, researchers will borrow from the other perspectives when they feel it is necessary to do so..... pick and choose from the array of methods at their disposal’.

Therefore, as the intention of this research was to extend the understanding of what is already known, it required a more open-minded approach, to capture a snap-shot of the fluidity of the educational environment and variation in experiences (Gorade & Taylor, 2004). In addition, as adaptation processes, alongside motivation and barriers, were the focus of this research it was felt that the research approach should derive from this. Pragmatism presented an attractive approach in this respect, which Morgan (2014) notes is rooted in a different starting point to other approaches: life itself, embracing the contextual, emotional, and social properties it contains. Dewey's approach, in particular, is seen as making no distinction between everyday life and research; research being nothing more than a more self-conscious, more careful consideration of social problems (Morgan, 2014). His use of pragmatism in relation to education (Dewey, 1938; Gill, 1993) provided evidence that the theory would fit well with an investigation into experiences in education. It appears that, in a revival of the use of pragmatism (Baert, 2005), its strengths are seen to lie in its critical as well as reflexive approach to contemporary issues, urging researchers to accept fallibility, whilst committing to: *'listen to others without denying or suppressing the otherness of the other... or thinking we can always easily translate what is alien into our own entrenched vocabularies'* (Bernstein, 2003, p. 387).

Consequently, I took a pragmatic approach when designing this research, for a number of reasons. Primarily, I felt that my experience gave me insight into student experience. My teaching experience in supporting both mature and traditional-age students and my experiences as a traditional-aged undergraduate and mature postgraduate student was important here. I felt that my knowledge and experience would help me make good design decisions, based on my detailed understanding of students and of HE, helping me capture the maximum amount of detail. This meant that I could consider students from the perspective of an educator, using relevant theories such as Dewey (1938) and Piaget (1936), but also from the perspective of a student, using other theories to explain their experiences such as Imposter Syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978) and Bourdieu's concept of Habitus (1977). Another reason I took this approach was because I wanted to be free to choose the methods I believed were required to examine this area in detail. Creswell (2013) suggests that this is one of the main benefits of the approach, as it gives researchers the freedom to choose methods and design research to meet their purposes. As I combined quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain this detail, so a pragmatic approach seemed to be appropriate. I felt that a more prescriptive approach could be incompatible with these mixed methods, and that they would blinker my approach to collecting data and analysing students' experiences. As I wanted to look at all the elements of students' experiences, it was felt that by moving away from restrictive approaches, I could achieve a better

quality of research; capturing the fluidity of the educational environment and the variation in experiences (Gorard & Taylor, 2004).

Indeed, there is a large amount of literature which supports the use of pragmatism within mixed method research. Bryman (2006, p. 117) found social researchers felt more able to understand their work in terms of practical outcomes, freeing them from being “dogmatically signed up to one epistemology”. Morgan extends this, considering the practical nature of this approach in mixed methods research, considering the ‘how to aspects of research’ as well as the ‘why to’ conduct research in a certain design (Morgan, 2014, p. 1046). Again, this presents pragmatism as an attractive option in view of the proposed research. In addition, with this research focussing on differences in adaptation, barriers, motivation and levels of achievement, the practical focus of this approach was attractive, because educational experience is so varied and changeable. It was felt that the individual experiences of university life could be captured well using this philosophy (Kelle, 2005). I also felt confident taking this approach, because both mixed-method research and educational research has tried, tested and debated the significance of the pragmatic approach (Baert, 2005; Bryman, 2006; Kelle, 2005). As it appeared less constrained than other approaches, I also felt that this would ensure that findings would be accessible to a wider audience. Consequently, I believed that taking this approach would help me make better informed conclusions, making the full use of the capacity for in-depth and broad findings.

#### 6.2.4: Longitudinal Analysis

The longitudinal element was used to observe the changes in adaptation, motivation and barriers over the course of the students’ undergraduate careers. A cohort study approach was taken, so that this research could take a snap-shot approach to the experiences within the 2015/16 first-Year cohort at this university. This was because I was very aware of the differences between different cohort years and also across HE institutions, so I was keen not to overpromise the representativeness of this research (Bryman, 2012). Whilst I was keen to understand the experiences of UK undergraduates, according to their ages, it was neither practical nor cost-effective to include other institutions in this research if it was not necessary. I believed that this would be a better-quality piece of research if it were to focus on a single cohort, in a single institution over time, rather than trying to make tenuous comparisons with different year cohorts or different cohorts at different universities.

Because drop-out tends to happen in the First Year of an undergraduate degree (Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1993), particularly for mature students (HESA, 2016), I felt it was important to see how experiences of adaptation, motivation and barriers in the First Year compared to the Second

Year on a degree programme, so that I could see what changed between these years. The timing of the PhD submission also meant that only two years of research could be included in this research.

There were two waves planned for the survey, one at the start of the students' First Year and one at the start of their second year. For the interviews, participants would take part in four waves, being interviewed at the start of each semester over the two years. It was intended that the diaries would follow a less formulaic structure, with students completing them weekly, where possible, or as events occurred where they felt it was appropriate to report their experiences.

The ongoing analysis of survey, interview and diary data was planned to inform the direction of questioning in both future surveys and interviews and diary questions as the research progressed. This would help the research to be responsive to issues as they occurred, rather than purely relying on past research for themes of student experience.

#### 6.2.5: Case Study Design

The decision to do a case study of a single institution was initially influenced by practicalities. A comparative case study approach was also considered, which would include students across a range of universities, so that experiences in different types of institutions could be compared. The practical implications this presented however, meant that this design was not considered possible. This was largely because of the workload demands required for a single researcher, who would need to collect data across geographical locations. Another major concern was how well the data from the universities would align and whether it would be comparable, due to internal and external differences. For example, the design of courses in the same subject at these universities might be very different, so it might be difficult to isolate age in the findings because of these differences. Other factors, such as campus design, might also make comparisons difficult. As a result, it was decided that a case study of a single institution would be more feasible, practically, and would also ensure that the comparisons made were better quality, because they were made across the same courses in one organisation. The institution, the year group and the departments the students belonged to, were seen to be important in providing a continuous link in experience, so that similarities and differences could be properly isolated.

A case study approach was also favourable, because it could provide the appropriate depth of analysis into the social issues affecting undergraduate students. It was also felt that the findings from an in-depth institutional case study could provide some generalisable conclusions that might help practitioners in similar HE institutions and provide a basis for educational policy both

in respect of students of different ages and the student body, as a whole. Yin (2009) maintains that a case study approach is particularly useful in investigating contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, helping to provide an in-depth contextual understanding of the group or individuals the research centres on (Yin, 1994). With student experience evolving, evidently affected by changing government policies (Burns, 2012), it was felt that a case study approach that concentrated on a specific cohort at a single university, would be useful as a historic account of how specific policies impact on mature students. A pertinent example is students being defined, increasingly, as consumers of HE (Rustin, 2016).

It was apparent that this research would be subjective, because it only looked at one institution, but by considering the context of the student sample and the institution, it might be possible to place these institutional findings into a broader HE context. The benefits of this approach also meant that considering findings from similar case studies could help to build a better picture on student experience. It also provides a useful template for opportunities repeating this research in other HE institutions, in the future. Because this research took a case study approach, it was also of particular use to the case study institution. Although this research was not sponsored by the institution the Widening Participation department, and the Deans responsible for student experience at this university, were keen to understand the findings of this research. Strategies were then implemented to help tackle some of the issues highlighted in the research in the First Year, which had led to mature students dropping out. As this research helped to make direct impact, before it was even complete, this sanctioned the decision in taking a case study approach.

#### 6.2.6: Ethics

Ethical approval was applied for in all aspects of this research through the university's ethics review procedure.

Firstly, approval was sought for pilot research, which involved participants either completing online questionnaires or attending a focus group at their local further education college. The main ethical issues in the pilot related to informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and data protection. I highlighted how these issues would be dealt with in the application. In terms of informed consent, potential participants would be sent project information sheets prior to their attendance, or completion of questionnaires. In these information sheets participants were assured that all personal details and identifiers in the focus group transcripts, and in the questionnaire data, would be anonymised. I also stated that once the audio files had been transcribed, these files would be destroyed, and participants would be assured of this. This

application did not encounter any difficulties during the review process and was consequently approved.

The same ethical review process was followed for the main body of research, which was started six months after the pilot study. My application was similar to my previous application, except for seeking approval for interviews rather than focus groups (see section 6.2.7 for an explanation for this change). I felt that the most important ethical considerations for students completing the surveys, interviews and diary entries, were gaining informed consent and ensuring their anonymity. The feedback received on this application was that the topic of age was a potential area of sensitivity and that care should be taken in terms of the Equal Opportunities Act (Her Majesty's Government, 2010) to avoid age discrimination. As a result, I was required to confirm how this research would meet the guidance in the act, giving participants a clear option not to enter their age, or any of the other background information requested in the survey questionnaire, if they did not want to. I confirmed that students would be advised of this verbally at the start of their lecture before inviting them to complete a questionnaire. The issue of voluntary consent was also raised in relation to the collection of qualitative data in interviews and diary entries. Consequently, I was asked to amend the participant information sheet, which asked students to consent to both interviews and diary participation, to ask potential participants to select which of the aspects of the study they were prepared to sign consent for, instead.

In the brief verbal overview given before the surveys, students were told that they were being invited to take part in research on student experience, which looked at how social characteristics, such as age, gender, ethnic group and subject choice, might influence their adaptation, motivations and the barriers they might face during their studies. They were told that they were not required to participate, but that their involvement would be appreciated, and that their contribution would help to highlight problems, so that things could change in the future. They were also told that their questionnaires would only be handled by me and that their answers would only be published in a summary form, so that they could not be identified. I also invited them to take part in the interview and diary phase by detailing their name and email and indicated that anyone involved in this phase would have their details anonymised.

As in the survey research, informed consent and anonymity were the main ethical issues in the interview and diary phase of the research. All potential participants were given Participant Information Sheets (see Appendix 3) outlining the planned research, by email, so that they were made fully aware of what they would be involved in and how this information might be used in

the future. The intention of this was to give them the option to properly consider their involvement and discuss any concerns they might have. When I then met these participants in person to interview them, I gave them a paper copy of this consent form before they formally committed to being interviewed and being involved in the diary phase. They were asked to commit to the research formally, by signing the consent form (see Appendix 5) and ticking whether they wanted to be involved in the interviews, diaries, or both.

As this was a longitudinal project, consent was renewed at the beginning of Year Two in emails sent to the interview and diary participants. Denscombe (2002) advocates renewed consent in longitudinal research, to give participants the opportunity to withdraw their consent as well as to remind the researcher that participants are free to withdraw consent during the research. Participants were told that they would be debriefed when the research was complete and that they would receive copies of all of their data, as a record of their experiences at university.

The more general ethical issues relating to anonymity, confidentiality and data protection were dealt with by anonymising any personal details or identifiers in the interview transcripts and diary entries. Once all the survey questionnaires had been inputted the originals were shredded. The electronic spreadsheet and statistical software files were stored on an encrypted password protected memory stick. Once audio files had been transcribed and the analysis was complete, the interview recordings were deleted from recording devices and all other electronic storage. The spreadsheets that the diary entries were recorded on were modified to remove any personal identifiers or details. Participants were made aware of this on their informed consent forms (see Appendix 4) and reminded of this verbally every time they attended an interview. It was also written on the opening form each time they completed a diary entry (see Appendix 9). No separate ethical consent was sought for the diary entries as this was included on the original consent form. The entries were anonymised and stored on an excel spreadsheet, which was also stored on the encrypted password protected memory stick. The email copies of the diary forms were deleted, once the research was complete.

In terms of disseminating the survey findings to participants, students were told in surveys that anonymised, summary data would be placed on the project web pages for them to view. They were also told that their departments would receive the same summary information in report form, so that they could be made aware of students' experiences. Extra caution was taken to exclude any information on students' age, gender, ethnicity, or subject area, where there were small numbers, as this might mean it was possible for individuals to be identified. In the interview and diary phase, participants were asked if they would like to receive articles



containing their quotes before they were published. Most did not see the need to see them prior to publication but said that they would be interested in seeing the overall findings, once the research was complete.

#### 6.2.7: Pilot study

A pilot study was conducted to test the data collection design and the terminology of questions for survey questionnaires, interviews and the online diary forms. It also gave me an opportunity to consider whether a focus group might be a more profitable and practical alternative to individual interviews.

I also believed that it would help inform my research design by giving me the opportunity to gain a current snapshot of mature student experiences in HE, giving my research design an evidence-based approach. As research often takes so long to publish, I believed that I would not be able to access this through the literature, in the light of the recent changes to the fees for undergraduate degrees. It was hoped that this would ensure that my data collection techniques were designed to capture relevant information well and make sure that I did not miss information because of my failure to properly understand current issues.

The sample for the pilot study was taken from the cohorts of four years of Access to HE programmes at a Further Education college. As I previously taught on the programme at this college, it was possible to gain a sample through my network of former students. The former students who were in their first, second and third year at university were sent a message inviting them to participate in a focus group at their former college, either by email or through social media. In addition, a handful of First-Year undergraduates had already tentatively agreed to be involved in my research when they finished their Access course, in July 2014. Six of the former students attended the focus group, three who were at university in their First Year (aged 17-20, 21-29 & 30+, when starting their degree), two who were in their Second Year (both aged 30+ when starting their degree) and one who was in their third year (aged 17-20 when starting their degree). The college were keen to host this research as they wanted to give their current students the opportunity to be in the focus group, so they could understand what to expect at University. I agreed to produce a report for the current students who were unable to attend, so they could also benefit from the information discussed. Three current Access students, who were all mature students, attended and asked the participants the questions on the sheets I had placed on the two group tables.

Students who were unable to attend the focus group, but wanted to take part in the pilot, were asked to participate by using online questionnaire forms (n=9), which had been set up to collect

the diary entry form data in the main study. This meant that I could test the design of the online diary forms, both in terms of their suitability and to check that the wording of my questions in the survey questionnaire and diary entry forms would be properly understood.

The pilot study taught me some important lessons, which benefitted the main research design. Whilst the discussion prompted in the focus groups provided a good amount of detail on experiences and feelings from all participants, one group was dominated by two individuals, which meant that large parts of the discussion involved monologue. This appeared to divide the group, causing other members of the group to disengage. In addition, the difficulties associated with organising the focus group made me realise that this was not the best way to collect individual accounts of university life. Younger mature students (21-24) had had no difficulties with attending the focus group, but it was very evident that attending the focus group was much more challenging for older students (30+) due to study, work, and family responsibilities. So, whilst I felt that focus groups might work for the younger students in the main research, I believed that individual interviews would be the best way to ensure I could capture the accounts from all ages of students. This way they could be arranged to suit individuals, whatever their responsibilities. I also believed that this might limit the number of students dropping out of the research.

The online questionnaire worked well in the pilot, completed by five respondents, two First-Year students (aged 30+ when they started university) and three third year students (aged 21-29, 30+ & 30+ when they started university). Respondents gave fairly detailed, well considered answers, therefore this was an effective way of capturing the detail of experiences of those who were unable to attend. Unfortunately, four of the students who chose to complete the questionnaires rather than being involved in the focus group, failed to respond. I suspect that the size of the questionnaire may have been a factor in their decision not to complete it. As a result, questions in the diary entry forms and questionnaires were kept concise in the main study, to avoid deterring participants.

Finally, both methods helped to confirm the range of barriers faced by different-aged students, as well as the different motivations and the impact this had on adaptation. Some of the terms I had used in the focus groups were not understood by the current Access students, but all of the students at university seemed to understand what the question required of them. I felt that this may present problems when questioning new undergraduates in survey questionnaires and diary entries, so in the main research I endeavoured to make questions clear, but detailed enough for all students to understand. The terms that I used in the online questionnaire

presented no problems, which confirmed that the questions were fit for purpose in the main research. This was useful in confirming that the questions used in the pilot research would capture the experiences I intended them to.

### 6.3: Data Collection and Analysis

The collection of data for this research was challenging, because of the time pressures associated with collecting data and due to the logistics of the research design. However, the benefits of taking this approach outweighed the challenges, because of the quality of data that was achieved. The analysis of large-scale secondary data was an efficient way of examining participation and to consider health and disability declarations by age. It also gave me an excellent opportunity to gain an appropriate sample, by targeting my efforts in departments where I knew there were mature students. By collecting large-scale survey data, I could look at specific elements of student experiences (adaptation, barriers and motivations) to explore how they affected students of different ages. Qualitative techniques built on these explanations, assessing how the issues highlighted compared to the individual experiences of different-aged students.

#### 6.3.1: Sample Decisions

The planning team at the case study institution granted me access to anonymised data on enrolment after I made a formal request, explaining what I would be using this data for. There were no difficulties obtaining this data before starting my research. The enrolment statistics (see Table 6.1) demonstrated that there were enough students of different ages to run the research as a case study, particularly for the survey part of the research.

Table 6.1: 2015/16 Cohort, by Age Group (Case Study Institution)

17-20	21-24		25-29		30-39		40+		Total
2828	90.32%	236	7.47%	33	1.05%	21	0.67%	13	0.41%
									3131

Concerns remained that for the qualitative phase of the research to be effective, enough students of different ages needed to volunteer for this part of the research. Thankfully, as will be discussed, once the expressions of interest on the survey questionnaires were reviewed, it was evident that there were enough to satisfy the age quota. Consequently, the comparative, back up, approach was not required.

To see how representative this sample might be, HESA data on Domiciled/EU students in UK HE gave some context to the proportions of traditional-aged and mature students (21 and over)

studying on full-time, undergraduate courses nationally, compared to student participation at this university. The HESA data illustrates, in Table 6.2 below, that the proportion of total mature undergraduate students in the UK fluctuated slightly in the 2015/16 cohort year, as it also had in the four academic years before this research began.

Table 6.2: HESA UK First-Degree Students enrolling in HE, 2015/16

Academic Year	Total Students (nationally)	Mature Student Population (nationally)	
2015/16	405265	84740	20.90%
2014/15	393730	83200	21.13%
2013/14	381670	79280	20.77%
2012/13	351635	74620	21.22%
2011/12	388915	79045	20.32%

Proportions of traditional-age and mature students for this institution in the same period are shown in Table 6.3, below. In comparison to the fluctuation in the national figures, total mature student numbers in this institution had decreased slightly each academic year, over the same period.

Table 6.3: Case Study Institution Data on Participation by Age

Academic Year	Total Students (case study institution)	Mature Student Population (case study institution)	
2015/16	3131	303	9.68%
2014/15	2430	193	7.94%
2013/14	2192	176	8.02%
2012/13	2137	201	9.40%
2011/12	2210	213	9.63%

Therefore, it is evident that the proportion of mature students enrolled at this university is much lower than the national figure, which made this an interesting prospect for this research, as this presented it as an unusual example. Despite recruiting at very different levels to the national average, however, the level of recruitment at the case study university is not dissimilar to that at other local universities, as shown in Table 6.4, below. Consequently, when compared to the enrolment details for other local pre-1992 universities, it is apparent that it enrolls similar proportions. As a result, this institution no longer appeared to be an unusual example, as its recruitment of mature students compared well to that of similar pre-1992 institutions.

Table 6.4: HESA 2015/16 Cohort at Case Study University and Local Universities

Undergraduate Age Group	Aged 20 and under	%	Mature	%
Local post-1992 university	4445	83.63	870	16.37
Case study university (pre-1992)	2665	91.26	255	8.74
Local pre-1992 university	3350	97.24	100	2.76

From the information in Table 6.4, it is apparent that the local post-1992 university recruits twice the number of mature students the case study university does. In contrast, the closest pre-1992 university, which is arguably more elite than the case study university, recruits even fewer mature students representing only 2.76% of their 2015/16 cohort. This supports the findings of previous research (Crozier, et al., 2008; Reay, 2004) that showed that mature students tended to choose post-1992, rather than pre-1992 institutions.

This means that although findings from this research are only generalisable to the case study cohort it focuses on, there may be scope for some generalisability across similar pre-1992 universities. It is likely that because mature students in such institutions are more likely to feel their difference to their traditional-age peers, because of their smaller numbers, than they would in post-1992 institutions. As much of the research in this area looks at mature undergraduate students in post-1992 universities (Reay, et al., 2010) and FE colleges (Burton, et al., 2011) using this sample helped to fill a gap in the research for up-to-date research on mature student experiences in pre-1992 institutions, as that provided by Christie et al. (2008).

### *Levels of Drop-out*

Another interesting factor that made this institution an interesting site for research, was the level of mature student drop-out. As discussed in the literature review, HESA data highlights that the rate of drop-out has been fairly static over the last 5 years, for UK mature students studying in UK universities. The case study university had a similar mature student drop-out rate, when compared with the national figures, but a much smaller proportion of mature students enrolled in their population (HESA, 2016). This suggested that experiences here might be worse than at other universities, because mature students were more likely to drop out in their first year.

Table 6.5: HESA Non-continuation after year of entry data (2015/16)

	Young students				Mature students			
	% of UK Undergrad students	Drop-out	Resumed (year out)	Transfer	% of UK Undergrad students	Drop-out	Resumed (year out)	Transfer
<b>UK</b>	79.1% (320,520)	6.4% (20,830)	9.8% (1900)	2.6%	20.9% (84,760)	11.6% (9860)	11.1% (1085)	1.9%
<b>England</b>	78.5% (271,925)	6.4% (17,250)	9.2% (1495)	2.8%	20.5% (69,855)	11.8% (8260)	11% (865)	2%
<b>Case Study</b>	91% (2665)	5.9% (155)	22.7% (25)	2.7%	9% (255)	13.7% (35)	9.4% (5)	5.1%
<b>Local Pre-1992</b>	97% (3350)	2.7% (90)	5.1% (5)	1.9%	3% 100	11.2% (10)	0%	7.1%
<b>Local Post-1992</b>	83.6% (4445)	8.2% (365)	10.2% (25)	4.6%	16.4% (870)	12.7% (110)	15.5% (20)	1.9%

In keeping with the figures from 2015/15, a similar situation was evident for 2015/16 cohort at the case study university. As previously mentioned, there were notably less mature students, proportionally, enrolling at the case study university this year, but levels of drop-out for UK full-time first-degree students are actually similar to the national pattern (see Table 6.5).

Table 6.5 shows that drop-out for mature students is almost twice the rate for younger students in the UK and England, but over twice the rate at the case study university. So, whilst the experiences of mature students at this university could be seen to reflect the experiences of UK mature undergraduate students in general, as this university recruited 10% less mature students than the national average, they can be seen to be worse at keeping the mature students they do recruit in their First Year (13.7%). This is true both in comparison to both the national figure for mature student drop-out (11.6%) and in comparison to the other pre-1992 university in the locality (11.2%). However, the other pre-1992 university has a particularly low rate of traditional-age student drop-out, at 2.7%, which is considerably better than the rate for mature students, at 12.7%. Also, the fact that none of the mature students resumed their studies there, alongside the high transfer rate for mature students, suggests that mature students may not thrive in an environment where they are such a small minority (3%).

Interestingly drop-out at the case study university is broadly similar to the local post-1992 university (12.7%), although a higher proportion of mature students are recruited (16.4%) than at either of the pre-1992 institutions, which reflects Reay's (2004) findings that mature students prefer to go to post-1992 universities. More of their mature students who drop out resume their studies (15.5%) than at the case study university (9.4%), which again suggests that mature students might have a better experience in this type of university because they return to it later.

In contrast the high transfer rates and low resumption rates for mature students at the pre-1992 universities suggests that they might struggle more in these institutions and so are less likely to return. In particular, as numbers of mature students are low, this could suggest that being in the minority has a negative impact and confirm that these types of institutions are not as good as post-1992 universities in accommodating mature students' needs (Christie, et al., 2008; McGivney, 1990).

The drop-out rates for age groups, shown in Table 6.6, below, give us an insight into withdrawal by age. It is apparent from this analysis that those who are in the youngest mature group (21-24) have experienced a high drop-out rate in the past, but this was not the case in the 2015-16 cohort year, where the 25-29 age group were most likely to drop-out. Although the 21-24 age group rose in drop-out in this year, they had a higher incidence of health declarations than other age groups at the case study university. This suggested that health barriers were an important factor in understanding mature student drop-out.

Table 6.6: Withdrawal Data (Case Study Institution)

Age Group		Under 17	17-20	21-24	25-29	30-39	40+	Total
<b>2013/14</b>	Enrolment		2660	148	53	61	67	2989
	Withdrawn		219	32	14	7	5	277
			8.2%	21.6%	26%	11%	7.4%	
<b>2014/15</b>	Enrolment	1	2758	181	50	67	67	3124
	Withdrawn		191	31	5	5	5	237
			6.9%	17%	10%	7.4%	7.4%	
<b>2015/16</b>	Enrolment		2894	243	52	63	59	3311
	Withdrawn		114	11	6	2	1	134
			3.9%	4.5%	11.5%	3.17%	1.7%	

### *Other background factors*

In terms of patterns of other social characteristics in the case study cohort, sex, ethnicity and disability also appeared to be important in student participation by age in the case study cohort. Looking at sex across the age groups (see Table 6.7), it becomes evident that there are more males than females in every age group, but males increasingly become a larger proportion of the mature groups, as age increases (except for 30-39). Males make up 77% of the 40+ group, for example, but are only 53% of the 25-29 group. It is also important to note that there were slightly more UK students identifying as male (52.4%) than as female (47.6%) in the case study

cohort in general. This is a little different to HESA's national statistics for all UK undergraduates in this cohort, with 55.38% identifying as female, 44.5% as male and 0.02% as other. In addition, no one in the institutional data identified their sex as other. Although there are quite small numbers in the older mature age groups, as shown in Table 6.7 below, men were a much larger proportion in these groups, particularly for those aged 40+ (66.7%). However, the 30-39 category was the exception in this pattern, with women dominating at 57.1%. Only one student identified as *other* who was from the 17-20 age group.

Table 6.7: Sex of 2015/16 cohort, by age group (Case Study Institution)

Sex	17-20	21-24	25-29	30-39	40+	Total
Female	1355	108	14	10	3	1490
	47%	45%	42%	47%	23%	
Male	1473	128	19	11	10	1641
	53%	55%	58%	53%	77%	
Total	2828	236	33	21	13	3131

The ethnic profile of student age groups in this cohort was also varied, as shown in Table 6.8 below. Some ethnic groups seemed to only participate at a younger age. As expected, given the demographics of the UK, White students were the largest group across all age groups. They were a particularly large proportion of all the mature age groups, and their proportion rose as the age of the group rose. They represented only 54.9% of 17-20-year-old students but this rose to 76.9% in the 40+ age group. Black British African students were the only other ethnic group that was represented across all the age groups. Students who identified as Other Asian were represented in all age groups across except for age 30-39, but there were only single students in the 24-25 and 40+ groups (see Appendix 10, Table 1 for full table). Most of the ethnic minority groups had representation up to the age of 24, but Asian Indian, Asian Pakistani, Mixed White and Black Caribbean and Mixed White and Asian were represented up to the age 25-29 group.

As this year cohort is representative of the ethnic population in general at this university, this might suggest that delayed participation in this institution is influenced by ethnic background. Table 6.8 shows that many students from ethnic minority groups participate as early as possible in their life, up to their early 20s. This might suggest that being from certain ethnic minority groups might mean that individuals feel restricted by their age, which is why they do not participate in HE at a later age.



Table 6.8: Ethnicity of 2015/16 cohort, by age group (Case Study Institution)

Ethnicity	17-20	21-24	25-29	30-39	40+	Total
Arab	14	1				15
	0.5%	0.4%				0.5%
Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi	43	1				44
	1.5%	0.4%				1.4%
Asian or Asian British - Indian	313	32	1			346
	11.1%	13.6%	3.0%			11.1%
Asian or Asian British - Pakistani	112	15	2			129
	4.0%	6.4%	6.1%			4.1%
Black or Black British - African	335	13	5	3	2	358
	11.8%	5.5%	15.2%	14.3%	15.4%	11.4%
Black or Black British - Caribbean	63	2				65
	2.2%	0.8%				2.1%
Chinese	54	7				61
	1.9%	3.0%				1.9%
Other Asian background	88	10	1		1	100
	3.1%	4.2%			7.7%	3.2%
Other Black background	17					17
	0.6%					0.5%
Other mixed background	42	3				45
	1.5%	1.3%				1.4%
White	1552	128	17	13	10	1720
	54.9%	54.2%	51.5%	61.9%	76.9%	54.9%

### Disciplines

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, a single year cohort was chosen to control for variations, such as changes to fees and to the way courses were delivered. I felt this was important, to isolate the experiences of students as changes could affect student experiences. For example, a new major and minor degree program was introduced across departments in the year after the sample students started their degree. Consequently, these students would probably have different experiences on their degree program compared to the students in the sample year, because of the change in the design of degree courses. This would have made comparisons across years much more difficult.

To ensure that the research could control for the age of students, obtaining the enrolment statistics for this group influenced a targeted approach. This meant that courses included in the research were selected according to the age range of their cohort. However, it was seen to be important to include a cross-section of disciplines, as well as group size, to consider whether the age of a student mattered more, depending on the discipline and group size. The practical constraints of conducting the survey as a lone researcher were also considered, so the number

of disciplines included in the research was limited to 10. The final sample for the surveys was determined by whether these departments wanted to be involved. The first survey was completed by a total of 825 First-Year undergraduate students. Table 6.9 shows the responses according to each department, the different sizes of groups of students enrolled and the number that participated. It was not possible to access all of the enrolled students during the surveys, as some were studying joint degrees, so at the time of the survey some students will not have been required to attend these lectures.

Table 6.9: First-Year Survey Participants

Department	Total Enrolled	Total Participants	Completion Rate
Biology	316	260	82%
Computing	163	123	75%
Criminology	111	88	79%
History	224	88	39%
Law	271	159	58%
Natural Sciences	33	32	96%
Psychology (e-survey)	220	31	14%
Sociology	64	44	68%

As previously mentioned, these courses were selected either because they had a good cross-section of ages or because there were only a few mature students in the cohort. It was hoped that this would demonstrate if there were differences in experiences depending on the spread of ages of students. Subjects with different-sized cohorts were also targeted, to understand whether the group size influenced students' experiences. A diverse range of academic subjects was selected, from both science and arts disciplines, so that subject differences could also be considered.

In selecting the interview and diary sample I prioritised the expressions of interest from questionnaires by students' age, but as group size was also being considered, I ensured that this was also used as a filter in selecting a sample. My intention was to have a handful of students from the same course at different ages in the sample, but this was difficult to arrange. I tried, where possible, to gain participants from minority ethnic groups and have a balance of genders, but this was also difficult to control. There were reasonably equal numbers of men and women and a good cross-section of ethnicities expressing an interest in participating, though young males and students from ethnic minorities proved difficult to recruit. This was apparent across the age groups, except for the 40+ category where there were more men than women and all potential participants were White British. I also felt that it was important to recruit students

with caring responsibilities. This was not as problematic as recruiting students with the other characteristics as many of the mature students had caring responsibilities, despite those with caring responsibilities being a very small proportion of those expressing interest in further research. As responsibilities are highlighted as a key factor in the literature, often affecting student experience (Mannay & Morgan, 2013; Hinton-Smith, 2012), including students with responsibilities was a priority in choosing the sample. None of the traditional-age students had caring responsibilities, although one had previously been the main carer for a parent, who was now being supported by other family members. Two women from the mature student groups had responsibilities for school age and young children. Two of the men from the mature student groups also had children but had no responsibility for caring for them. One had only financial responsibility for his children, as they did not live with him, and the other had some financial responsibility for his children, who were young adults, studying at university themselves.

Although all mature students were contacted following their expression of interest, only a handful responded to the email which invited them to detail their experiences in interviews and diary entries. This is possibly because the students who had initially expressed an interest were now in the midst of their First-Year modules, so they may have reconsidered whether they had the time to commit to the research. A quicker response to their expressions may have improved the numbers who took up the offer to be involved.

### 6.3.2: Age Group Classifications

Much of the research discussed in the literature tends to look at the mature student age group (21+) as a whole (Hinton-Smith, 2012; González-Arnal & Kilkey, 2009). I believed it was important to try break this group into more discrete groups to see the effect students' ages had on their experiences. Another limitation of the literature was that it did not often make direct comparisons between traditional students and mature students (Bowl, 2001; Jaimeson, 2016; Hinton-Smith, 2012; Reay, 2004). Again, a more detailed approach was taken to facilitate these comparisons, so traditional students were also included in the research sample. I grouped ages to compare experiences and to allow for a more detailed consideration of the influence of age in the mature student group in HE. Students were categorised into the age groups below, adapted from the definitions used by HESA and UCAS in their more detailed student reports:

- 17-20
- 21-24
- 25-29
- 30+

I initially wanted to understand whether there was a difference within the 30+ group, as it was such a large category. I intended to use the same age groups as UCAS by splitting the older mature student group into two: 30-39 & 40+. I felt that those over 40 might be at a different point in their life-course to those in their 30s. For example, more people are now becoming parents in their early 30s (Office for National Statistics, 2016), so it was felt that the responsibility barriers they experience would be different to the barriers mature students over 40 experienced. Initially a 50+ group was also envisaged. However, there were so few students aged over 50 in the university (n=2), this group was removed from the analysis in the planning stage. Whilst I initially analysed the institutional and survey data using a 40+ group (as shown in the institutional data presented in the last section), the first survey only yielded nine students aged 40+ and this dropped to three students in the second survey. Consequently, I also removed this group at the analysis stage as it would be difficult to draw meaningful conclusions from such a small number of students.

However, I felt that by breaking mature students into separate age groups (although this was less detailed than I had hoped), rather than one large homogenous group, age-specific differences in their experiences should become apparent. It was suspected that those contained within this wide range of ages may experience HE very differently. I wanted to see whether barriers could have a motivational effect in terms of aiding adaptation and avoiding drop-out, but also observe if they had a limiting role for students at different ages. I hoped that the design of this research would remedy the lack of detail on differences in experience within the mature student group. I also believed that the changes to the funding of HE (Burns, 2012; Hillman, 2013) and the impact of this on HE course provision (Horrocks, 2017; Taylor, 2018) might have changed mature student adaptation, motivation and barriers, so this research aimed to extend understanding of the experience of students at different ages. This would give policy-makers and widening participation departments a detailed understanding of age difference in HE. I designed this intending to demonstrate whether there is an optimum age for being an undergraduate student; to consider whether mature students are more likely to struggle with their studies in HE.

### 6.3.3: Analysing Secondary Institutional Data

As previously mentioned, I obtained enrolment data from the case study university, to add context to the primary survey, interview and diary data I collected at that institution. Initially, as shown earlier in this chapter, I used this data to consider the context of my sample: how this institution compared to other HE providers in the locality and how mature student experiences

here might compare, nationally. This data was also used for identifying the social characteristics of the students who had enrolled in 2015/16, so that I could see whether age stratification revealed any other patterns of stratification (as discussed previously) and I also used it to examine the same details in the years before the research cohort started, to provide context to their year group. Lee calls this type of data 'running records' (2000, p. 63), which are particularly helpful in providing a background to longitudinal research. For the research findings, I used this data to help me to understand health and disability declarations made during enrolment for the cohort year.

The information I received was in Microsoft Excel, which made it easy for me to export this data into a statistical package. Before I exported it, I added a column which recorded the age groups (see earlier discussion) students were in, but I also kept the original age variable. The age group variable made my analysis easier, as most of the details collected were categorical, except for age, so I felt that I could provide enough detail by looking at age groups. Also, as HESA data was presented in a similar way, I felt that this would make comparison easier. In addition, as previously discussed, older mature students (aged 30+) were in much smaller numbers than the traditional-aged students, so any analysis I conducted using age as a continuous variable was made problematic because these students' ages acted as outliers.

For the contextual analysis, as shown previously, I conducted bivariate analyses using the age group variable to consider participation by age, ethnic group, gender and academic year. I also conducted bivariate analyses for disability and health declarations, by age. I would have also looked at students' social class, because this has formed a large part of research on non-traditional students in the past, but unfortunately, as parents' occupations had been used, this was difficult to use. This was because many of the mature students had failed to provide this information, possibly because they felt that their parents' occupation was irrelevant. I suspected that other background characteristics would be important in understanding how well students would adapt.

#### 6.3.4: Survey Data

The aim of the survey was to collect data on attitudes and experiences at university, from different-aged students from a range of courses. Survey questionnaires focussed on the three main areas under investigation: adaptation to the demands of university life, the barriers students faced and their motivations.

Preparations for the survey began in the 2013/14 academic year, so that all the documentation and plans were in place. This meant that I was ready to survey the new undergraduates as soon as they started, in October 2014. Help was initially sought from the university's Widening Participation Officer who was responsible for mature students. They suggested I target older learners first using a list, which they provided. This list included all undergraduate mature students in the university at that time. This list included data on their age and department, so it illustrated which courses mature students tended to enrol on. I then contacted some of these departments, to see if they would be involved. Just before the 2015/16 academic year started, actual enrolment figures were obtained from the planning office at the university. This was essential in making sure that mature students had actually enrolled in the predicted departments. The only department where there was a notable change in the range of ages was the Medical School. As I already had concerns that medical students' experiences would be too different to students in the other departments, because of the practical element of their studies, this department was removed from the target list. As their degrees were classified differently and they studied over a longer period than other students, this also meant that it would be difficult to make meaningful comparisons with student groups in other departments.

Department administrators from the targeted departments were contacted for help with arranging to survey students in introductory lectures. These requests were generally passed on to heads of departments, who then contacted their teaching team to identify lecturers who were willing to accommodate the survey. Introductory lectures were seen to be a good place to survey students, as it was felt that there would be high levels of attendance. It was also felt that lecturers would find this less of an interference, because the purpose of many introductory lectures is to cover the basic elements of modules, e.g. what is expected of students/what will be covered in the module. Of the 10 departments contacted, 9 agreed to participate. The department that did not agree to participate failed to respond to my emails and phone messages.

#### 6.3.4.1: Collecting Data

The first survey took place at the beginning of October 2015. Nine departments agreed to take part in the survey phase of the study. For seven of these departments, a first impressions questionnaire was handed to students when they entered introductory lectures and completed before their lecture started. Almost all of the students in attendance completed these questionnaires (n=825). A small number of questionnaires were returned blank (n=5) and some

students only completed one side of the questionnaire (n=3). Four students failed to disclose their age.

An online version of the questionnaire was made available to the two other departments, due to concerns about restricted time. With the help of the university web team, the online questionnaire was set up on the university website. Completed online questionnaires were automatically collated into a spreadsheet, which only I could access. An email was sent out by a senior lecturer in one department and by the Administration Manager in the other department. Online response was low, with only one of the two departments generating responses: 31 of a potential 200 students (15.5%) completing the online questionnaire. In the case of the department who failed to generate any online responses, I suspect that there may have been a problem with the email that the department sent, because there were no responses at all.

In the first survey questionnaire (see Appendix 1) I asked for students' social characteristics and also asked questions relating to the focus of the research: motivations, barriers and adaptation. I also asked students about their highest qualifications, where they were living during term-time and if they had boarded at school. I felt these questions were important because qualification type and independent living might impact on adaptation, in the first weeks at university. I also asked for their previous postcodes to see how far they had travelled to go to university and whether this had a relationship with their age. I felt that this was important as age case study research showed that distance appeared to influence mature students' choice of university (Elliot & Brna, 2009; González-Arnal & Kilkey, 2009). The postcode was also intended to be a unique identifier, so that I could track individual student's answers through the surveys. I did not link this to POLAR data because of the time constraints, but this may have helped me bridge the gap in information on social class in this sample.

The Second-Year questionnaire survey took place in early November 2015. It was completed by 706 Second Year undergraduate students who all completed paper questionnaires which were handed out in lectures. Most students completed the second questionnaires, but there were two spoiled papers and 15 papers which were only completed on the first side. Table 6.10 shows the potential numbers of students from each department (minus the students who dropped out by the end of their First Year) and the number of participants. The survey had fewer respondents than in the First Year (-119) across the departments, except in Psychology. There were significantly more responses from Psychology students than in the previous year, as the paper-based questionnaires yielded a much better response than the online questionnaire the

previous year. I felt that this was because they were a captive audience, waiting for their lecture to begin.

Table 6.10: Second Year Survey Participants

Department	Total Still Enrolled	Total Participants	Completion Rate
Biology	306	148	48%
Computing	157	69	44%
Criminology	110	47	43%
History	214	79	37%
Law	256	180	70%
Natural Sciences	29	20	68%
Psychology	214	133	62%
Sociology	56	30	54%

The second survey questions (see Appendix 2) were based on the questions used for the first survey, but the emphasis here was on changes in adaptation, motivation and barriers. I also added questions asking how they felt when they returned to university, whether they were enjoying their course and how well they felt they had performed. I kept all of the social characteristic questions included in the first survey, as well as asking them to provide their postcodes for where they were living before they started university. I kept some of the questions from the first survey, which asked students what worried them most about university, so I could see if this had changed now they had a year under their belt. I also made changes to the options for ethnic group. I collapsed some ethnic groups as there were small numbers in some of the groups in the First-Year survey. For example, there were only five Arab students and seven Mixed/multiple ethnic group: White and Black Caribbean. I also changed the Black/Black British: Caribbean to Black/Black British Afro-Caribbean, as students in the first survey choose 'other ethnic group' and wrote 'Afro-Caribbean'. I also took the Black/British other category out, as no one selected this in the first survey. As timing was not so important in the second survey, because I did not need to recruit participants for interviews, the second survey took place later in the first term of the students' Second Year. I also found that departmental staff were reluctant to do this survey earlier in the term because modules were more demanding in the Second Year. In addition, many students' degrees specialised this year, meaning that there were fewer students available in lectures, because they did not all have the same core modules.



#### 6.3.4.2: Analysis

For the first survey, I added the data from the paper questionnaires to a spreadsheet, which was produced by the online survey. For the second survey I also inputted all the data into Excel, in the same format as for the first survey. Once all the questionnaires had been inputted, I checked the categories for errors and added in a new category, which recorded which age group students belonged to. I then imported the spreadsheet into a statistical package (SPSS) so that I could analyse the data in detail. Although it might have been more sensible to input data directly into the statistical package, I was more confident using Excel, particularly in terms of checking for errors, so I felt that this was time well spent.

In the statistical package I produced frequencies within categories and looked for common responses to the question. This also helped me to check for errors in the data. Then I conducted bivariate analysis, looking at how responses compared by age and age group. I was also prompted to revisit the data and conduct other bivariate analysis, following issues that arose in the interview and diary phase. For example, looking at responses by ethnic group rather than age group. I also recoded some of the data so that I could consider conducting a multivariate analysis, but as there was no causal outcome I was unable to find a meaningful analysis.

#### 6.3.5: Interview and Diary Data

The use of interview and diary data was essential in exploring and explaining the survey results. I used diaries and interviews, so that I could account for different students' preferences, to help me retain participants and to encourage involvement on their terms (rather than mine). I hoped that by students using varying data-collection methods, it would give me more authentic responses. For example, McGivney (1996) suggests that student participants are more likely to blame the course or institution for problems in interview, but more likely to cite personal reasons in a written response.

Students completing the first survey questionnaires were invited to take part in this second phase of research. Before the surveys took place, I sent an article explaining the project to the university's online weekly news publication. This was done both to try to engage students in the qualitative research and to provide them with information on the project, prior to the survey. As a result of this news item, I received an email from one of the participants, asking to take part before they had completed the survey questionnaire. I asked students to consider taking part in the interview and diary phase, when I was briefing them about the research, directly before they completed their questionnaires. Expressions of interest were recorded at the end of the survey

questionnaire (see Appendix 1). Students were asked for their name and email if they were interested in taking part in this further research. 228 expressions of interest were received from survey questionnaires.

Students from Psychology and Sociology were more likely to express an interest in participation, and Computing students were much less likely to want to take part. As Sociology and Psychology students study social research, that may have been why they were more interested in taking part. Despite the low participation of Psychology students in the survey, I believe many of them may have expressed an interest in the second phase because they accessed the survey online. This demanded a more proactive participation from students than for the other subjects, who were a captive audience. This may have meant that the Psychology students who purposefully accessed the questionnaire were naturally more interested in research, because they chose to take part and did not feel required to take part, as students might have done in the surveys completed in lectures. There was a risk in gaining a biased sample for this phase of the research, particularly in terms of the online surveys, as students had to volunteer to participate (Gorard, 2003). Also, these students may not have had equal access to the email about the survey or all have access to the internet at a convenient time to access the survey (Bryman, 2012). The paper-based survey was more likely to yield an unbiased sample, because all students in attendance were given the same opportunity to complete the survey and expression of interest section. However, there is always some risk of bias when asking for participants to volunteer their involvement. I was not overly concerned about bias within the qualitative sample, because this element of the research was designed to explain the survey findings, which had an unbiased sample. I acknowledged that a result of a potential bias, because of the recruitment of volunteers, some of the explanations found in this group might be limited.

From a practical point of view, I felt that between 10 to 20 participants would be a manageable number for a single researcher, in the time available to conduct this research. I planned that a portion of these participants would opt to complete only diaries, to contain my workload. This phase used quota sampling to control for age, and according to discipline. I also wanted to try to have a cross section of ethnic groups and genders. Firstly, I screened the expressions of interest according to age to populate my sample according to age and discipline. I then controlled for subject area. Ideally, I hoped to be able to gain participants from a small range of disciplines so my qualitative research would examine differences across courses. For example, Physics students might have different motivations and barriers to learning than Sociology students of the same age. I also wanted to have different group sizes, because I felt that this would affect student experiences, particularly for mature students.

I decided to try to reduce the variables that might affect students in this phase, so only home students would be included in this sample. I also felt that it would be pertinent to look at how financial issues and adjusting to university life impacted on UK students only. This was because I felt that financial circumstances and adaptation might be very different for EU and international students, because of the differences in fees and the costs associated with attending a university overseas. I also believed that cultural and language differences would make adaptation very different from the adaptation of UK students. However, this decision made recruiting students for the older age groups much more difficult, as many of the older students were international. However, when participant numbers dropped I decided to re-recruit, and one of these participants was an international student. At this point I felt that, because his family were living in the UK with him during his studies, and because he had many of the same responsibilities as the female home mature students, I felt the cultural differences might not be so different.

Although I intended to recruit 10 to 20 students from five different age groups from the first undergraduate survey, this was problematic. Initially, I hoped to have at least three participants engaged for each of the age categories. However, recruiting students from the mature groups was difficult, essentially because there were small numbers of mature students in the older groups at this university. As shown in Table 6.11 below, traditional students were not hard to recruit as they were a very large group. They may also have been keen to be involved, because they had fewer responsibilities or commitments, outside of their studies. Mature students were much more difficult to recruit, particularly because there were so few of them in this institution. In addition, as mature students often have multiple responsibilities, I felt that many would not feel they had the time to participate in research as well. Whilst it would have been useful to have canvassed findings with a wider group of mature students, attempts to recruit such a group (through the Mature Student Widening Participation Officer) proved even more difficult.

Table 6.11: Students contacted about taking part in the Interview and Diary phase

Age Group	Interested	Contacted	Agreed to Participate
17-20yrs	150	19	4
21-24yrs	13	13	1
25-29yrs	4	4	1
30+yrs	7	7	4

Although there were more than enough UK students expressing an interest in participating in the 21-24 age group and the 25-29 age group, I still found it very difficult to populate these

groups. I contacted interested students in these groups three times before I gained a participant in each of these age groups. I was concerned that if I contacted them too many times, this would lead to me getting participants who were not that committed. As a result, I was initially only able to recruit single participants in two of the mature age groups. As shown in Table 6.12, below, all but one of the students was White British, which was not ideal, although there was a good mix of males and females in the mature student groups. However, because this stage of the research could not be representative, it was used to help explain the real-life experiences that linked to the findings from the large-scale data, I felt that having at least one student in some of the age groups was enough.

Thankfully most of the participants stuck with the research, which meant that I would have some detailed individual case studies. Some of the students who experienced problems stayed with the research, which was particularly good when looking at some of the issues that related to the research questions. Two of the females in the 30+ group dropped out of this university. One signed up at another university the following year, but she agreed to continue as a participant, so that I could consider what happens after students drop out. The other student stayed in touch but did not return to HE. The only female in the 21-24 age group dropped out of the research towards the end of the first year, though she continued her studies at the case study university. Two of the females in the 17-20 age group also encountered problems at the end of their First Year. One left both the university and the research. The other was required to take a year out of university (resit without residence), due to failing an exam. She also agreed to continue with the research to help me to understand how she coped with this challenge and remain motivated during this time. I was also keen to see how she would adapt to the exam requirements, so she could return to start her Second Year.

Therefore, at the beginning of the Second Year, I lost four participants from the research. Three more students were recruited to replace the mature students who had left, because I felt that it was important to have detailed data in all the age groups. I also felt it would be difficult to interpret the large-scale data results without participants in all the age groups. As there were a good number of participants in the 17-20 group, I decided not to replace that participant and concentrated my efforts on recruiting mature students. I revisited the expressions of interest from the first survey and I was able to gain a participant for the 21-24 group. As this student was a Black female with childcare responsibilities, I felt that she would be a great addition to the research, because she crossed the boundaries of age: she was young, only just 21 when she started, but had the same responsibilities as older mature students. I also enlisted the help of the mature students' Widening Participation officer, who emailed undergraduate students from

the 25-29 and 30+ age group, asking them to participate. As detailed in Table 6.12, I recruited two males to replace the lost female participant in this group, as a result of this email. It also helped me to recruit another female for the 30+ group, who was repeating her Second Year.

Table 6.12 Interview and Diary phase Participants

Age group	Participant recruitment 2015	Participants leaving	Participant recruitment 2016
17-20yrs	White female Black female (diary only) White female White female +employment (interview only)	Black female	
21-24yrs	White, female +employment	White, Female, +employment	Black female +child
25-29yrs	White male		
30+ yrs	White female + children White female + children +employment White male + employment White male	White female +children	Mixed Ethnicity (Black & White British) female +children White Male White Male +children

#### 6.3.5.1: Collecting Data

The students who had agreed by email to take part, were asked to meet with me so I could interview them and run through the ethical paperwork. I agreed to meet them in the Students' Union, which I felt would be a more relaxed space, because teaching staff didn't tend to go in there. I felt this would make it easier for the students to be open about their experiences and fears. The Student Union initially agreed to let me use rooms for interviews, but this was a problem for some of the interviews, as other students were making use of these rooms, so I had to ask them to leave. There was also quite a sterile atmosphere in these rooms, which made dialogue more stilted. As the interviews progressed, I decided that cafés were the best place to meet, because the students appeared to be more relaxed. After the First Year, I let participants choose the place they wanted to meet, which were increasingly off-campus cafés. I found that they seemed much more comfortable in these cases.

Most students were interviewed once each term in the first two years of their degree and once in their third and final year. Students who were interviewed less than this tended to be mature and found it difficult to schedule time to meet, feeling too busy to accommodate this. Interviews generally took between 30 to 70 minutes. One of the traditional-aged students opted to do only the diaries.

Interviews were semi-structured and questions focussed on student experiences in the key areas highlighted by the research questions: adaptation, motivations and barriers to learning (see Appendices 5,6,7,8). Questions were developed using the literature from these areas and edited, if required, following the pilot study findings, which are discussed later in this chapter. However, questions were not asked exactly as written in the interview question documents, as I wanted to let the dialogue lead to the research questions, so these were asked in the manner or order that worked best for that conversation. For example, love of their subject area was something that emerged that I did not intend to explore, but appeared particularly important when it was discussed in the interview, as it related to motivation but seemed to help both in adaptation and gaining a feeling of belonging. As previously mentioned, I also used these discussions to inform my analysis of the survey data, but I also found that it was useful in deciding on the questions that should be included in later survey questionnaires. For example, when isolation and belonging came out as a significant issue in the interviews, this informed my decision to include a question on belonging in the third survey.

In addition, I often tried to make use of my status as a student, as well as a researcher, to help students identify with me, so that our discussions could be franker. I felt this was important regardless of their age, but it felt more important for students who were younger than me, to try to bridge the participant/researcher gap. My relationship with the mature students was notably easier, I believe because I was also a mature student, with responsibilities outside of university, so they felt I was well placed to understand their anxieties and difficulties.

The online diaries involved students completing online questionnaires (see Appendix 9) in a secure area on the university website, in a similar way to that used by Kearns (2014). However, based on Kearns' concerns about the excessive amount of data generated through his participants' online diaries, I took a more structured approach by making entry field questions specific to the research questions. This was to try to ensure that data would be as comparable as possible, with entries limited to the research focus areas (motivation, barriers and adaptation). The form data was automatically stored on a spreadsheet, held in a secure area on

the university's server. Students automatically received an email copy of their diaries and I also received a copy, once they had submitted it.

Initially, students were asked to use the online diary forms on a weekly basis, however, by the end of the first month this appeared to be too much for the students to manage. Because of this I changed it to a monthly entry and I sent students a reminder each month to complete them, with a link to the page. Completion rates were very good, though some of the mature students missed some of the diary entries on occasions. One of the traditional-aged students initially agreed to produce diary entries, but did not ever complete one, as she felt she did not want to have to complete something else on her computer. Some of the students gave detailed accounts; others gave brief responses, but still enough to create a running commentary of their experiences. This data was then anonymised.

#### 6.3.5.2: Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and placed alongside diary entries for each individual participant, organised chronologically. The data from the interviews and the diary entries were then analysed thematically and coded according to sub-themes relating to barriers, motivation and adaptation. These were also used to try to understand differences in student drop-out and performance. Additional codes were added as other themes became apparent in this phase, and from the survey research. I used a comparative approach to consider the similarities and differences between individual participants' experiences. First, age related differences were considered across these themes. Other characteristics highlighted in the literature formed part of a secondary layer of analysis, in keeping with the themes evident in the literature, such as students' issues relating to health (McGivney, 2011), employment (James, et al., 2013), gender (Hinton-Smith, 2012) and ethnicity (Harper, et al., 2007). I felt that this was important, to avoid making assumptions that differences were all to do with age, when health, class, gender or ethnicity might also be causing differences in experience. This was a useful approach to take, because there were some occasions where I initially felt I had found experiences that were exclusive to an age-group, but I later found that age was not the only characteristic causing these experiences.

### 6.4: Evaluation of Research

One of the biggest problems with this research was the time constraints, which affected every element of the design and the reporting in this thesis. The size of the project and the amount of data collected was also an issue, because of the limited space in which to detail findings. I also

felt that I learned some important lessons in the design of the surveys and in analysing data where the focus group was particularly small. This section will discuss these challenges and also the strengths of this research design.

#### 6.4.1: Time Restraints

Firstly, I believe for the design of this research to be properly considered the full three years of a student's experience is needed. I feel that without third-year data this research can only show a snap-shot of the influence of age, as in the final year students' adaptation, motivation and their challenges would be particularly important. As a result, I took the decision to continue to collect survey, interview and diary data in students' third year, though this could not be presented in this thesis, as there was not sufficient time to transcribe and analyse this data.

Secondly, time was an issue in terms of writing the thesis. As I was still collecting and inputting data throughout my writing-up stage, I had to neglect the writing up because, for me, the practical side of the research took priority over writing. This meant that writing the thesis was neglected, therefore I believe this thesis would have been of a better quality if I had focussed my efforts on it in my final year.

However, my experiences have suggested that even partial findings have been important in terms of impact. For example, the yearly findings have been useful for the institution in understanding their students better and considering, as the findings took shape, what strategies might be useful in helping to support students both in this cohort and beyond it. In addition, being able to present some of my significant First Year findings at conferences meant that this research might also be making a difference, beyond this institution.

#### 6.4.2: Collecting and Analysing Data

Despite piloting the survey style and the questions, inevitably there were lessons to be learned in each survey. I also had some issues with the way in which I approached the analysis.

Whilst I expected that some questions would not be answered, I felt that some of the patterns of non-response were down to the way in which I presented the survey to the students, but also down to the way in which I had posed the questions. I did not explain why I had included the postcode question (see Appendices 1 & 2), either in my briefing or on the questionnaire, which I believe led to a high non-response to this question amongst home students. It was evident from some of the comments that this question was too personal and, as I came to surveys wearing my staff lanyard, I suspect that students might have been concerned that this may have been used to identify them individually. In the first survey there were 24 missing postcodes for



UK students and in the second survey there were 62 missing. Most of the missing postcodes were from ethnic minority groups, who were 16 of the 24 missing in the first survey and 32 of the 62 missing in the second. Also, many students only gave the first part of their former postcode.

In hindsight I feel that I should have explained why I was asking for their postcode in the briefing and have only asked for the first part of students' postcodes, to try to reduce the number of non-responses. I was still able to gain a fairly detailed location as to where students had come from, with the first part of a postcode. I also feel that if I had presented myself as a student researcher, rather than being a visible member of staff, this may have made students less suspicious of me and more willing to give this information. Where postcodes were supplied, I found this to be really useful in tracking participants and considering who was missing and who was new to the research in the second and third survey.

One of the flaws in the design of my questionnaire was where I asked students to choose only one response (see Appendices 1 & 2). Some students selected more than one response for these questions. For example, in the question *What worries you most about university?* some students checked both *The standard of work required* and *Organising my study time*. This left me with a difficult decision as to how to record their answers. As most students only chose one answer I could not record a second response anywhere. I dealt with this by allocating half of these double responses to *The standard of work required* and half to *Organising my study time*. Whilst I could have changed the design of this question in the Second-Year survey to a ranked order response, I was concerned that this would make comparison with the First-Year survey difficult, so I decided to stick with the original question design. The same thing happened in the Second-Year questionnaire (Appendix 2) where students were asked *What is the strongest feeling you had about coming back to university?* where many students chose both *I was looking forward to being with my friends* and *I was looking forward to learning*. This was dealt with in the same way as the 'worry' question in the First Year. On reflection, I feel that asking students to place responses in order of importance may have been better from the outset, as it was clear that they felt they had more than one feeling in these cases.

As a result, I believe that the survey design was not detailed enough to capture the multifaceted nature of motivations and barriers, particularly for the mature students, though this was explored in interviews and diaries. For all of the traditional-age students in the interview and diary phase, motivation initially, was as simple as one thing: their career. As being at university meant so much more for mature students, personally, and often for their families, a more

detailed approach would have helped me make more generalisable and accurate conclusions on motivation. Whilst questionnaires were a practical way to collect data, they were not very effective at collecting detailed data on complicated matters, such as motivations and barriers.

#### 6.4.3: Analysis

The problem I had in respect of analysis related to the design of the research and the sample I selected, due to there being such small numbers of mature students. As previously discussed, it was difficult to compare the answers between the traditional-age and mature student groups. The mature groups were very small (see Table 6.13) compared to the traditional-age group in the first survey.

Table 6.13: First-Year Survey Participants, by Age Group

17-20	21-24	25-29	30-39	40+	Total
749	44	12	7	9	821

This problem got worse for students aged over 30 in the Second Year (see Table 6.14), thus making comparisons using the 30-39 and 40+ group difficult. As previously mentioned, these groups were eventually collapsed, as a result of this, into a single 30+ age group. In contrast the number of students in the younger two mature age groups increased in the second survey. This suggests that younger mature students were more likely to be in attendance in their Second-Year lectures, than students in the older mature group and traditional-age group.

Table 6.14: Second-Year Survey Participants, by Age Group

17-20	21-24	25-29	30-39	40+	Total
595	71	23	5	3	697

Therefore, I did feel that with these small numbers it was difficult to generalise results for students over the age of 30. In a different institution, where there were more mature students in the two older age groups, this would have been easier. However, as one of the reasons for selecting this institution was because the mature student group was such a minority group, this was to be expected, to some degree. In addition, whilst comparing the smaller groups of mature students to the large traditional-age group was difficult, the mature student groups were comparable, so that I could still effectively examine the differences in experience within the mature student group.

#### 6.4.4: Strengths

Despite the concerns discussed above, I felt that my research progressed much better than I initially thought it would. Although there were gaps in some of the data, I believe that I was able to capture a varied picture of student experience by age, because of the design decisions I had made. Whilst choosing to analyse different sources of data was challenging, I believe that the information collected explains a variety of in-depth experiences according to students' ages and other characteristics. As will be discussed later in the thesis, the resilience of mature undergraduate students was certainly a resounding feature across the different sets of data. As will also be considered, the similarities across the age groups were also evident. The longitudinal design was essential in revealing these similarities and highlighting that some of the adaptation difficulties and motivational differences that were associated with age often only affected students temporarily.

# Chapter 7: Adaptation Results

## Introduction

This research looked at student adaptation in two key areas: social adaptation and academic adaptation. This was because it was assumed that students who had adapted fully would be confident both socially and academically. So, in line with these ideas, it was assumed that a fully adapted student might perform better than a student who had only adapted either socially or academically. For the purposes of this analysis, survival is deemed to be students who perform well in their studies and persist to the end of their degree. For example, if a student had only adapted socially or only adapted academically, they may be more vulnerable to dropping out of their studies or may perform worse than comparable students who had adapted in both these areas. As students' motivations and the barriers they faced were so tied up in their adaptation, this made it difficult to separate out issues that were specifically related to adaptation. In other words, adaptation could not be considered in isolation. Therefore, whilst I discuss the main adaptation experiences in this chapter, in general positive results seem to originate from students' motivations, and negative effects seem to be caused by barriers. As mature students' motivations and their barriers were more numerous, this resulted in their adaptation being more complex than for traditional-age students.

This chapter considers whether mature students adapt differently to traditional-age students and also whether mature students adapt differently to each other, according to their age. It also considers whether adaptation techniques change over the course of mature students' undergraduate studies. Firstly, academic adaptation is discussed, including performance and learner identities. Secondly the discussion turns to issues that relate to social adaptation, which include the HE environment and fitting in to university.

## 7.1: Academic Adaptation

Most of the students in this research, of all ages, seemed to prioritise academic adaptation, rather than social adaptation, but for many of the mature students this was the *only* important element of adapting at university. An instrumental attitude was evident in both the surveys and in diary entries and interviews: students were here to leave with a good degree at the end of it, whatever their planned next step.

In the surveys students were asked what worried them most about university, and academic issues scored the highest percentages across the age groups, as shown in Table 7.1 and Table 7.2, below:

Table 7.1: What worries you most about university? (First-Year survey)

	17-20		21-24		25-29		30+		Total	
Accessing support	16	2.1%	2	4.5%					18	2.2%
Being able to attend lectures and seminars	25	3.3%	2	4.5%			1	6.25%	28	3.4%
Fitting in at university	90	12%	6	13.6%	1	8.3%	4	25%	101	12.3%
I have no worries about university	29	3.9%	2	4.5%	2	16.7%	1	6.25%	34	
Managing my finances	87	11.6%	7	15.9%	1	8.3%	3	18.75%	98	11.9%
Organising my study time effectively	195	26%	6	13.6%	4	33.3%	5	31.25%	210	25.6%
The standard of work required	280	37.4%	17	38.6%	3	25%	2	12.5%	302	36.8%
Other	22	2.9%	2	4.5%	1	8.3%			25	3.0%

In the first survey *Organising study time* and *the standard of work required* were the most commonly selected answers for all age groups except for the 30+. Whilst the standard of work required was the most popular answer in the younger age groups (17-20 and 21-24), organising my study time was more popular in the 25-29 and 30-39 age groups.

Table 7.2: What worries you most about university? (Second-Year survey)

	17-20		21-24		25-29		30+		Missing		Total	
Accessing Support	5	0.8%	3	4.2%					1	11.1%	9	1.3%
Being able to attend lectures and seminars	31	5.2%	7	9.9%	2	8.7%			1	11.1%	41	5.8%
Fitting in at university	8	1.3%	2	2.8%	3	13%	1	12.5%			14	2.0%
I have no worries about university	25	4.2%	4	5.6%	2	8.7%					31	4.4%
Managing my finances	58	9.7%	8	11.3%	3	13.0%	1	12.5%			70	9.9%
Organising my study time effectively	212	35.6%	2	31%	6	26.1%	1	12.5%	2	22.2%	243	34.4%
The standard of work required	231	38.8%	2	29.6%	6	26.1%	4	50%	2	22.2%	264	37.4%
Other	14	2.4%	1	1.4%					2	22.2%	17	2.4%
Missing	11	1.8%	3	4.2%	1	4.3%	1	12.5%	1	11.1%	17	2.4%

As will be discussed later in this chapter, *fitting in at university* appeared to be much more of a concern for the older mature group, as well as *managing finances*, which will be discussed in Chapter 9.

In the second survey, organisation appeared to have been more of an issue than 17-20-year old students had believed it to be in the first year, as more selected *organising their study time* than previously, with a higher percentage here than in other groups. *The standard of work required* remained the top response for the 17-20 group, though responses were more evenly split between these two academic responses. More students aged 30+ selected the response *The standard of work required* in the Second Year, suggesting that they had adapted to study habits better than they had initially thought, but had become more concerned about meeting the requirements for assessments, as also found in Crozier et al.'s research (2008) and by Chapman (2017).

#### 7.1.1: Age and Performance

The aforementioned results have important implications for our understanding of how age affects students' experience of academic performance. Whilst the literature suggested that mature students might be more proficient at organising their study time than traditional-age students because of their experiences in employment, the two older mature student groups in this cohort obviously did not feel prepared when they first started their degree. However, it is likely that they became aware of their abilities in organising their studies, as by the Second-Year survey this had become much less of a concern. This was also reflected in early diaries and in interviews, as the older mature students began to see how their personal responsibilities actively encouraged them to be more organised. This is shown here by Sally, in respect of her children:

**CS: The skills that you already had from work, what have you brought with you do you think?**

Definitely scheduling, especially having three children and two with special needs. Every day has to be organised and you constantly have to have contingency, because inevitably things don't go the way you plan so it is about having the organisation to make sure I can fit everything in, my studies when my assignments are due. So those kind of skills, a lot of that, because I was working in events, a lot of timescales and things like that, so I have kept that mentality of utilising my planning skills really (Sally 30+, interview, winter 2015).

And by Andrew, here, in respect of his employment:

**Have you had to adapt to any changes this week?** Working weekends means that I need to try and complete all my uni work and domestic chores Monday to Friday (Andrew 30+, diary, November 2015)

This was evident for all other mature students in the interview and diary phase, even those who had no responsibility for paid employment, such as Adam (25-29) and John (30+), who treated their studies as though it were a 9am to 5pm job.

Students were asked about their perceived performance in the Second-Year survey to understand whether their age appeared to influence their academic adaptation. As it was felt that they might feel uncomfortable revealing their grades on the questionnaire and as Dewey (1938) and Gill (1993) believed degree scores were not an accurate measure, students were prompted to describe their performance by selecting responses instead. They were asked 'How well do you think you performed last year?' and given the responses 'I performed really well', or 'I did not perform to the best of my ability'. If students felt they had not performed to the best of their ability they were able to explain why, either by selecting one of the options detailed in Table 7.3, below, or by writing their reasons by the 'other' option. I felt that this would be useful in understanding how adaptation issues might feed into performance.

Table 7.3: Self-reported reasons for students not performing at the best of their ability, (Second-Year survey).

How well do you think you performed last year?	17-20	21-24	25-29	30+	Missing	Total
I performed really well	213	28	14	3	1	259
	35.8%	39.4%	60.9%	37.5%	11.1%	36.7%
I did the minimum required to pass the year	76	4				80
	12.8%	5.6%				11.3%
I got distracted by other things in my life	81	8	2		2	93
	13.6%	11.3%	8.7%		22.2%	13.2%
I had personal/health problems	42	6	1		1	50
	7.1%	8.5%	4.3%		11.1%	7.1%
It took me a while to get used to what was required	174	21	4	4	2	205
	29.2%	29.6%	17.4%	50%	22.2%	29.0%
Other	9	4	2	1	3	19
	1.5%	5.6%	8.7%	12.5%	33.3%	2.7%
Total	595	71	23	8	9	706

Most participants answered this question, with only 19 responses missing (2.7%). Of the students who did answer, the majority (63.3%) chose: 'I did not perform to the best of my ability'. The remaining students selected 'I performed really well' (36.7%) though two remaining students wrote their own response on the questionnaire, one writing '50/50' and the other

writing 'I did OK'. The 19 students who selected 'other' raised some key issues relating to difficulties in them adapting to academic demands. Some expressed anger at institutional issues, such as exam arrangements and poor teaching. Others didn't understand why they hadn't done well. Barriers were also highlighted as an issue which had affected academic adaptation, which included family responsibilities and mental health issues. Some cited a lack of motivation as the reason for their poor performance.

For those indicating that they had not performed to the best of their ability (66%), the reasons selected by participants are shown in Table 7.3. Some of the findings suggested that age did not affect students' perception of their academic adaptation. For example, most age groups had similar splits in selecting *I performed really well* and *I did not perform to the best of my ability* (see Table 7.3). All but one age group (25-29) had most respondents selecting *I did not perform to the best of my ability* (between 60%-66% across most age groups), so there was no notable variation between traditional-age and most mature student groups in this regard. The age group where this differed was the 25-29 age group where the split was the opposite, with over 60% selecting *I performed really well* and 40% selecting *I did not perform to the best of my ability*. Expected counts (see Appendix 10, Table 13) were used due to the small numbers in the mature student groups and they showed that those in the 25-29 age group who selected *I performed really well* were almost double that expected. As a result, they were significantly underrepresented in choosing *I didn't perform to the best of my ability*, unlike the other groups who answered quite closely to the expected numbers. It could be that this is a good age in terms of adaptation, with students benefitting from experiences in employment but being young enough to draw from their prior experiences in education (Piaget, 1936). Missing age responses had 89% (n=8) negative responses and only 11% (n=1) positive, which suggests that these people were more concerned about their studies than the ones who openly declared their age, perhaps because they were fearful of being identified whilst admitting they were not doing well.

Doing the 'minimum required to pass the year' was only selected by students in the youngest two age groups, and the 17-20 group were overrepresented in the expected counts analysis (see Appendix 10, Table 13) and underrepresented for students in all mature age groups. As this relates to students' performance in their First Year, where grades are not used in calculating final degree classifications, it could be argued that doing the minimum required might be a coping strategy. This is because the grades for the First Year do not count towards these students' end grades, so some of them may be inclined to underperform. This may help students cope with the competing demands of university life (socialising/employment etc.) in their First Year. As shown in Table 7.3, interestingly no one at all in the 25-29 or 30+ category selected this,



even though it was expected that responsibility barriers would impact on older mature students, so they might do just enough to survive (Piaget, 1936). This aligns well to Foster's (2009) findings, as mature students felt that they worked harder and were more dedicated to studies, than their traditional-age peers. This was also evident in some of the interviews and diary entries as Rebecca (30+) demonstrates here, with her determination to get the most out of her First Year in her diary:

If one more person tells me this year doesn't count! ... I want a first. I am here because I want to apply for graduate medicine because I am bonkers ... [and] if I don't pass this year then they will not fund next year (Rebecca 30+, diary, November, First Year).

Christie (2009) also highlighted similar comments from non-traditional young students and two of the traditional-aged students, who were the first in their family to go to university, also mentioned this in interviews and diary entries:

**Do you have any worries about studying/attending university?** I think I'm worried that I won't be able to find the balance between too much and too little revision, and I think that even though I want to do as well as I can, the fact that a lot of my friends still have plans because the first-year logic is "we only have to pass" I'll end up socialising a lot more than I plan to because they don't feel the need to do as much revision (Emma 17-20, diary, April, First Year).

**And getting your grades from last semester, how did that feel?**

Um, good. I passed everything. I didn't quite get a first, but I was just off it, so I was happy. Because the first year doesn't count and you can afford to make mistakes, and then when it comes to next year you know sort of where you're going, which is good that they do that.

**But you still wanted to get the grades, you didn't sort of think, oh as long as I pass?**

No, no. A lot of people do sort of have that, 'Oh that's all that matters', but I think if you're not going to try and get a higher and then maybe make a couple mistakes, when it comes to next year when it is graded, a lot of people are going to be like, shit (Bethany 17-20, interview, Spring, First Year).

All of the mature students in the interview and diary phase also appeared determined to get the best out of their time to practise assessments, ready for the Second Year, when grades would begin to be used in the final degree calculation. This may be a self-selection bias, as the students who volunteered to be involved in the qualitative phase might have been more studious than the students who did not volunteer. As the two older mature student age groups did not select this response at all, it suggests that concentrating their efforts on honing their academic skills was the most important thing for these mature students.

Ben (30+) also discussed how he used his First Year to adapt academically, so that he could improve his grades:

**Charlie: How do you feel about the grades you got last year and how hard you worked?**

Quite good on the whole, and the thing that pleased me most is that I got better grades in the second semester. So, I was learning what I did wrong and from the feedback that I got.

**Charlie: Okay, so you think that the better grades are a direct result of you listening to what was said, or seeing what was said and understanding what the expectations were?**

Yes, because for me, it's a process of adapting, because I got really good marks on my course before I came to uni, but I don't think it was marked as strictly. And also it's a different subject, different marking rubrics and obviously with [my subject] there's a slight difference between [teaching staff from the two departments] as well. So, it's just a case of getting used to all that and just trying to improve with each assignment (Ben 30+, interview, winter, First Year).

Early in the interview and diary phase, mature students often suggested that being older meant that it took them longer to process information, which they felt would affect how they performed, as Sally shows here:

Obviously the old grey matter is a bit rusty in the sense that I have been so used to doing the line of work I was doing...the biggest challenge is being organised in a different way, so there is a lot of reading on this course and I always read to relax. So now when I am trying to read, but stay focussed, and not nod off. I would sit on the sofa and think, 'Oh, I have just not read those past four papers at all!' I have read them but not digested them (Sally 30+, interview, winter First Year)

Andrew (30+), John (30+) and Rebecca (30+) also made similar comments, but, in particular, they struggled to get used to the style of learning, particularly as they were in large groups in lectures.

Andrew (30+) discussed this in his first interview:

Sometimes even when you just say something out loud you just think, hang on I don't get that as well as I thought I did. Sometimes it is nice to have that conversation and for them to go, no, it is like this. But you don't get that, we are just kind of talked at. I kind of understand why, but I am kind of missing that aspect of it. I just feel a bit unprepared because, like at baby school at 5, it is assumed you know nothing and go through everything, but here you are expected to go away and read up before you attend the lectures, or read back through your notes which is a totally different process to what I've had in any other form of training and that includes work based training (Andrew 30+, interview, winter, First Year).

It is evident here that contrary to Rogers' (2003) view that adults struggled with taking the role of a child in education, Andrew was actually looking for the adult child relationship in university, possibly because this was in his existing schema for education (Piaget, 1936). In this sense he had to adapt to a new teacher student relationship, which he found hard. John (30+) also said that it took him a long time to get used to this style of learning, because throughout his career he had been used to dialogue, not one-way learning. However, these difficulties were short lived and they quickly adapted to this style of being taught. Although she was much younger, Amy

(21-24) also highlighted this, in her interview, giving credence to Gill (1993) and Dewey's (1938) arguments that traditional teaching methods in HE are ill-designed for students, and make adaptation difficult, regardless of a students' age:

**Charlie: So the tutorial is your only option to discuss with someone what you have been learning?**

Yeah to talk to someone about what you have been learning. I think it would be helpful to have more of those, so that you can actually speak to someone if you don't understand things. It is weird, uni is weird, it is all just over email and stuff. Not much teacher to student contact, it is a bit odd. I find it odd (Amy 21-24, interview, winter, First Year)

Whilst Amy was reluctant to contact teaching staff outside of tutorials, John (30+) felt very differently and often overcame his problems by contacting staff members, Andrew (30+) sought help from peers on his course, and Rebecca (30+) asked both staff and peers for help when she needed it. In addition, changes in their Second Year meant that many of these students started to be taught in smaller groups, which both John and Andrew found helpful. As Amy dropped out of the study (but not university) before the end of the First Year, it was not possible to understand whether being in smaller groups made a difference to her adaptation to the methods of teaching.

These experiences did not appear to be unique to mature students, or those over 30, as getting used to the style of learning was something mentioned by all students. The difference was that many of the traditional-aged students were not surprised, or phased, by this and so they adapted quickly, as demonstrated by Bethany in her comments here:

**In terms of the changes, the quality, you know, the quality of demands, how well do you feel you've adapted to that sort of step up?**

I'm getting there I think. It's just the reading, there's so much reading for [one of my subjects]. That's what, I think that was probably the biggest shock actually was how much reading there is.

**Okay.**

I mean, I think [at college] you don't realise how much it's just kind of fed to you, and you kind of, you get a strict criteria and you do this, this and this. And here it's kind of like, you know, do all this and just kind of get on with it. And it's like, oh (Bethany 17-20, interview, First Year).

It is likely, therefore, that what John and Andrew were experiencing is just what every other undergraduate experiences when starting their degree, but older mature students tend to find it more difficult to adapt to initially, perhaps because their education schema is less familiar (Piaget, 1936), or because of issues relating to their learner identities (Chapman, 2017; Reay, et al., 2010).

## 7.1.2: Learner identities

Whilst students would probably have a range of feelings about coming back to university, the Second-Year survey asked them to select the strongest feeling they had about returning.

As shown in Table 7.4 enjoyment of learning certainly seemed to be a priority for most of the mature student groups, which appears to be a neglected part of educational policy in recent times (Williams, 2012; Dore, 1980). This was particularly evident for students aged over 25 in the interview and diary phase. Many of the students from these age groups were very passionate about their subject, and their learning, in their diary entries and interviews whereas the students aged 17-20 did not ever appear to enthuse about their subject. Much of their discussion was centred around the practicalities of learning, such as writing good assignments and achieving good grades. However, as the diary entries and interviews were largely structured around the practical elements, it is possible that were not prompted to talk about their enjoyment. It is also possible because they were so embedded in the instrumental processes in education (Bourdieu, 1986; Williams, 2012), which will have dominated most of their life at this point, that enjoyment might not be something they necessarily associated with their education, maybe taking this for granted.

Table 7.4: Strongest feeling about coming back to university? (Second-Year survey)

Age Group	17-20		21-24		25-29		30+		Missing		Total
Looking forward to being with my friends	196	32.9%	11	15.5%							29.3%
Looking forward to learning	246	41.3%	38	53.5%	16	69.6%	4	50%	6	67.6%	43.9%
Worried about being on my own	19	3.2%	2	2.8%	1	4.3%	1	12.5%			3.3%
Worried about my studies	115	19.3%	18	25.4%	5	21.7%	2	25%	2	22.2%	20.1%
other	16	2.7%	1	1.4%			1	12.5%	1	11.1%	2.7%
missing	3	0.5%	1	1.4%	1	4.3%					5

Adam (25-29) and Sally (30+) were particularly enthusiastic about their subjects and often explained the detail of what they had been doing. Sally was asked about the highlights of her experiences at university a month after starting her degree, and stated:

The actual course that I am doing, obviously being at the university that [made that ground-breaking discovery] and doing a [my subject] course is fantastic (interview, winter, First Year).

This enthusiasm continues one of Sally's later diary entries:

**Overall, how well has this week gone for you?**

At last a fairly uneventful week at home and some fantastically interesting tutorials. Absolutely loved visiting the special collections at the library with [my] tutorial group. Feeling very positive! (Sally, 30+, diary, November, First Year).

John (30+) was also very enthusiastic about his subject and, in the beginning, the teaching staff in the departments delivering his joint degree. He had previously met one of the lecturers in one of the departments whilst working at a voluntary event, involving the practical side of the discipline he then decided to study. In contrast the students aged 17-20 rarely mentioned enjoying their course or feeling excited at being at this university. This didn't seem to have an impact on their adaptation, however. Adapting to the academic demands of a degree can be very difficult when students are not fully committed to their degree course. Rebecca (30+), for example, wanted to be a medic, but could not get a place, so she chose an alternative degree as another route to get into medicine. Once she started, it became apparent that she was not so committed to her degree subject, because she did not enjoy the modules as much as she thought she would. Obviously other factors were also at play, but certainly in Rebecca's case, a lack of enjoyment seemed to eventually lead to less commitment.

It is also evident from Table 7.4 that students of all ages were worried about their studies and this was only slightly more evident in the mature student groups, who had a marginally higher percentage of students selecting this response. Whilst some of the mature students made mention of feelings of imposter syndrome in early interviews and diary entries, most notably some of the male mature students, Adam (25-29), Andrew (30+) and John (30+), only Andrew specifically mentioned how this continued to affect him longer-term. It is also important to note, as will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, that Andrew linked these difficulties to his behavioural condition and not to his age. Therefore, concerns about academic performance did not seem to be an issue for most of the mature students in this research, in relation to their learning identities. Only Adam mentioned negative experiences from school, though he held himself, rather than teachers or the system of education, accountable for this, as will be discussed later in Chapter 8. Indeed, for most of the students in this research past experiences and their performance seemed to be more of a motivating factor than an adaptation issue.

The other factor which appeared to have a significant impact on mature students was negotiating commuting with their academic commitments. Travel was often cited as an issue, not only for Rebecca (30+), but also for the other mature students who commuted into university. Some of the other mature students already lived in the city; others moved there when they started their studies, living either in student halls or other student accommodation.

Adapting to academic and timetabling demands did not appear to be a problem for any of the students who lived in the city, either in student accommodation or their own home. The mature students who chose to commute some distance to attend this university generally did this because of their passion for their subject area, or because the reputation of their department was better than that of universities closer to their home. However, being far away from home seemed to have a limiting impact on their social adaptation. This was very evident in the case of John (30+), who lived 60 miles from the university, of Sally (30+), who lived around 30 miles away and of Rebecca, who lived 33 miles away. As none of the traditional-age students commuted, it was difficult to make a direct comparison, but it is likely that commuting is a general problem for students of all ages, however this might be more of a problem for mature students. This is because mature students are more likely to have to commute, but also because their additional responsibilities mean that they have less time, so commuting is more burdensome. This adds to Manthei and Gilmore's (2005) and Busher et al.'s (2014) findings which highlighted the restriction of time for mature students, although they did not actually find, as I did here, that students had specific issues with adaptation because of their commute.

For John and Sally, who were passionate about their subjects, because of the reputation of their departments, the commuting commitment seemed a necessary means to an end. Commuting was something they initially felt they could adapt to, because of their love of the subject and their commitment to the institution. However, the reality of the commute made it very difficult for these students to adapt socially. Sally (30+), for example, had to organise her commute around her childcare responsibilities as she explains here:

**Charlie: What have you found challenging, so far.**

The distance really and car parking which is an absolute nightmare. So if I have like a 10am lecture which I have [module A] at 10 on Wednesday, it is so difficult to get them off to school and nursery and then get here. I literally get here with 2-3 minutes to spare, so I know that it is constant worry, any little bit of traffic on Wednesday and I know I am gonna be late. People do turn up late, like people have turned up with only 2 minutes to go on a lecture, but touch wood, I haven't been late until now but it is an anxiety of mine. I know that if one little thing goes wrong in a morning then it is going to affect me getting here. (Sally 30+, interview, winter, First Year)

Sally's commute, combined with her caring responsibilities, made social adaptation to university almost impossible. As discussed later in this chapter, this might have resulted in her intentionally isolating herself. For John (30+), the strain of the 5-hour round trip to commute into university took its toll towards the end of the First Year. He was able to make arrangements with his department to reduce his attendance to 2 days, which helped. Nevertheless, the travel continued to challenge him throughout the course of his degree.

All three commuter students (Sally, John and Rebecca, all 30+) had difficulties adapting socially, because they needed to travel home and were unable to stay for social events, which were generally in the evening. This resulted in a very instrumental approach from all three students, who talked about turning up for classes and then returning home, often choosing not to attend social events or even to stay to socialise with other students in cafés, on campus. This certainly seemed to have an impact on their social adaptation, as seen in Meehan & Negy's (2003) research, but was undeniably part of all three students' difficulties adapting to the academic demands of attending university. Although, a combination of factors fed into these difficulties for all three students. For example, travelling seemed to regularly cause Sally problems at university, because of her childcare responsibilities. When her children or her parents (her main childcare support) were ill, this meant that she would have to forgo taught sessions. This did not ever seem to impact on her motivation, however, and it was not something she ever complained about. Indeed, despite dropping out at the end of her First Year, Sally remains committed to returning to this university to complete her course. Rebecca also found commuting to be a very difficult thing to adapt to, which also affected her ability to socialise with other students, as discussed later in this chapter. As a result, she cited commuting as a contributing factor when she also dropped out at the end of her First Year, at the case study university. Though, interestingly, Rebecca seems to have subsequently coped much better with the challenges of travel, despite now attending a course at a university which is further from her home and much more difficult to get to. She also appears to have adapted much better both socially (e.g. engaging with other students) and academically (e.g. the demands of the course). This suggests that whilst commuting can make academic and social adaptation difficult, having a passion for your chosen course can help to override the challenges bought by being a commuter student.

From looking at the survey data, it certainly appears that for many mature students, being close to home is an important consideration, because of responsibilities and commitments. Age was negatively correlated with **distance from home** (-.138) and **the time it takes to travel to their family home** (-0.161) (see Appendix 10, Charts 1 & 2). Although these correlations are very weak, possibly because of the small number of mature students in this analysis, this tallies with Elliot & Brna's (2009) and McGivney's (1996) research. As highlighted in their research, this demonstrates that mature student choice was influenced by practicalities linked to their responsibilities, generally meaning that they were restricted to attending local universities. As demonstrated in Sally's case, trying to negotiate childcare responsibilities and commuting can be particularly challenging, so she never foresaw opportunities for her to take time to participate socially.

## 7.2: Social Adaptation

It was evident from this research that age certainly affected students' social adaptation. This section will demonstrate that both environmental factors, and perceptions, were at play in this. Perceptions about mature students appeared to be based on the social norms within education. This was evident in comments from participants in respect to teaching staff and in respect to other students, which had an influence on these individual students' ability to adapt. However, the mature student participants also perceived themselves as different, because of their age. This often appeared to have more influence on their ability to negotiate the social side of university, than because of the attitudes of others. Nevertheless, having friends at university, even if it was only one, certainly seemed to be important for all students, eventually.

### 7.2.1: HE Environment: Institutional Issues

Social adaptation issues arose in relation to social norms in the institution. The type of teaching and university social events organised (Bourdieu, 1986) and the way in which students were taught (Dewey, 1938) were particular issues for the mature students. These issues seemed to stop them from being able to form social networks at university and this seemed to be time-dependent, as making friends after the first couple of weeks seemed to be particularly difficult.

Firstly, mature students from all age groups suggested that they were made to feel different to the traditional-age students, because of the type of events organised for students, both in Freshers' week and after that. For example, Adam (25-29), and Amy (21-24) expressed frustration, because consuming alcohol seemed to be the main social activity, during Freshers' week and after. Although Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) observed negative attitudes from educators and peers, who saw mature students as deficient, this did not appear to be the experience of the mature students at this institution. Negativity actually emerged from the mature students towards their younger peers, in contrast, who they felt were involved in juvenile activities that they had no desire to repeat. The pressure to go out drinking in order to socialise at university, seemed to result in an 'I'm too old for this' attitude from these mature students. For example, Adam discusses here why he only socialised a few times with his university peers, because of feelings of 'déjà vu' and a lack of belonging due to his age:

Only at the beginning I felt a bit lonely, and just like going out, after a few times, going to the [students union] stood there feeling old. Not because people were saying "you look old", just like you are sat in a cinema, watching your life again. I've done [partying] a lot. Just feeling out of place, almost, and ending up going home early (Adam 25-29, interview, winter, First Year).



Amy (21-24) also discusses how she felt she had already experienced that lifestyle before and did not want to repeat it, similar to the feelings expressed above by Adam. However, her comments also express her frustration at the domination of the drinking culture at university, rather than a lack of belonging because of being older:

I didn't do Fresher's week, because I was 18 once and I've done that and I just didn't want to do it again ... I don't really drink, it is just really not my thing and a lot of the events are drinking, which I struggled with, I did want to get involved, but I didn't want to go out every night, so I found that a bit bad...it is a drink culture which I don't think they should be advertising when you first come to uni. I think they should give you more opportunities to like speak to your tutors and just get to know people. Maybe do day trips...so I would have preferred it if it was a bit more like that (Amy 21-24, interview, winter, First Year).

Joanna (21-24) said that she got involved in some of the Fresher's week activities and met some of her new friends there, as well as reconnecting with friends from college. However, because of her caring responsibilities for her son, and because of her commitment to her studies, she said that she had become "anti-social". She said that she did not want to go out at night with other students. Like Amy, she also said that she had done that before and now was her time to make the most of this opportunity. Ben, who joined the research at the start of his Second Year, also communicates a similar feeling in his comments here:

I think for mature students, that's probably the difference between us and the younger students, who are just discovering themselves. Whereas we already had lives formed before we came here.

**In terms of their student experience how do you feel about that? Did you come here with any sort of expectation that you might live that life or...?**

No, for me it's all about the course, I've never been that social anyway or into drinking or parties, so I knew that part of the lifestyle wasn't for me.

**Okay.**

It was all about the course and whether, I knew if I picked the right course and came to the right place, I'd still have a good time (Ben 30+, interview, winter, Second Year).

Only one of the older mature students (30+) attempted to join in with the Freshers' week social activities. Rebecca signed up but could not bring herself to go in the end. Her concerns seemed to relate to being too old to participate in something that she perceived was for younger people. Her comments in her interview illustrate this, to some extent:

**Charlie: Did you do to the induction and fresher's week events?**

No, I wanted to, partly because of the experience I missed when I was younger, and partly because I knew it would be the only way to meet people. I think my reservations about the age difference stopped me...I did sign up to go on the fresher's week bar crawl with the Psychological society, but I had had a bad day...I was tired and wanted to go home....I paid

for a t-shirt and I paid to go, and I got a B&B and I sat in my car and thought, 'I don't have to go if I don't want to-I'm going home' (Rebecca 30+, interview, winter, First Year)

Two of the male students who were aged over 30 maintained that they did not attend Fresher's week events either. This was because they felt confused as to what was required of them in the first week, not because they felt they did not want or need to participate. It appeared that there were problems with both the methods of communication and the type of activities organised for Freshers' week for mature students. In terms of communication, John suggested he had received such a lot of emails from the university that he struggled to absorb everything he needed to know about the first weeks and missed the information about many of the events. When he did attend university, he was mistaken for a postgraduate by his department and was directed to the wrong induction event and he only realised that he was in the wrong place once the introductions started. As a result, he missed out on integrating with his peers in that first week. Both John and Andrew (30+) attended a later event with the mature students' association, but for John, involvement in social activities was short lived. This was partly because he felt that this did not seem to be of any benefit, as he already had an existing set of friends he socialised with where he lived. Andrew (30+) did not attend Freshers' week events either, but he continually tried to get involved socially, moving into student accommodation, locally, to help him try to do this:

I didn't do the fresher's week but I went to the pub quiz with some guys from the mature students association, which I didn't even know about until the end of the first week. And then I've been on a couple of bar crawls with the [my subject] society and [another subject] society and [my department] society (Andrew 30+, interview, winter, First Year).

Therefore, although they did not initially feel that they were excluded from events, because of their age, they realised later that missing these events actually created a problem in terms of their ability to adapt socially into their peer groups.

Secondly, many of the mature students felt that they were excluded by the university, indirectly, through the way in which their degree courses were delivered. John 30+ described his frustrations with one of his compulsory modules, which he felt was not appropriate for mature students:

At the start of this term, the new academic year, we had a compulsory module, Professional Skills, and I lost it. I literally had to walk out of the first class because the discussion was around we're going to teach you how to do a CV and you're going to have to submit one for 10 percent of your marks, and you'll need to do a covering letter, and we're going to teach you how to do that. And I was like, I don't need this, I've got a really pukka, swept up CV thank you very much, and I'm fine. Well, you've got to do it, it's compulsory. I was like okay ... I didn't want to disrupt their education, but I did not need to be there.

**Charlie: So, there was no sort of appreciation of the fact that this was not fit for purpose for you?**

Part of my feedback was that... I get the fact that the vast majority of my peers are aged between 18 and 22 and have never held down a job, and I absolutely get the need for them to do this. However, this has not taken into account my needs (John 30+, interview, winter, first Year).

Similarly, it was evident that some of these mature students sometimes felt excluded not only by the type of events organised for students but also because of the comments of teaching staff. Sally (30+) suggested that lecturers were sometimes a little ignorant of mature students being present in lectures, using examples of culture that were only relevant to younger students:

**Charlie: Is this what you expected university and your course to be like?**

Yes and no. I kind of expected the course to be delivered how it is being, but I didn't expect myself to feel kind of like, a bit more isolated. Don't get me wrong, I do find the content of lectures is very much aimed at a younger audience, but then that is the majority audience.

**Charlie: A one-size-fits-all thing?**

Yes, kind of. I didn't expect it quite so much, but as I say, that is the majority audience.

**Charlie: What is it that is done that makes you feel like that?**

It is just like the kind of, the other day there were Harry Potter things.

**Charlie: So it is the examples that are used?**

Yes, but to be fair I think I can be a bit finicky about that, but on the other hand it would be nice to have a bit of acknowledgement in that sense.., they will kind of say something and go "Oh you won't remember that" but I'm thinking, 'I do remember that!' (Sally 30+, interview, winter, First Year)

This links with the findings from Ryan & Glenn's research (2004) who maintained that the design of teaching can have a positive or negative impact on First-Year students' performance and retention rates. Whilst such comments from lecturers were not the main cause of Sally dropping out of her course, it is evident that this contributed to her lack of social belonging amongst her peers and in terms of her relationships with teaching staff.

Assumptions made by lecturers about the age of their audience reminded mature students, like Sally, that they were different to most of their peers. The same was evident for many of the introductory social events organised by the university, where mature students were not given equal opportunities to adapt socially and build up a network of peers. These age-related reminders made them feel invisible, like they did not belong in the body of students. Reay et al.'s (2010) research aligns with these findings, indicating that a student's sense of belonging, in an institution, can have a powerful impact on their confidence in that environment and in their development as learners.

Another perspective on belonging was demonstrated by Simon (30+), who suggested that belonging was linked to a feeling of being acknowledged and appreciated as a student. Having struggled to catch up after his children suffered a bout of illness, which he then also contracted, his answer was that his sense of belonging was weaker:

I don't really know of any service at the school or process to help me out given my missed time. The [my subject] society has been really helpful though, which has kept me feeling connected. (Simon 30+, diary, March, Second Year).

It is evident in his comments here, that whilst his extra-curricular links to the university helped him, he felt less connected and possibly less valued by the university. Therefore, as Piaget (Piaget, 1936) highlighted that successful adaptation would take place when both the human and the environment evolved together, this suggests that only partial adaption could take place for mature students in this institution, as many of these student were attempting to evolve but the university was not. Although mature students could overcome some environmental adaption issues, once they were familiar with the environment, there were clearly issues that they found more difficult to overcome. Had the university been more sensitive to such issues and provided appropriate resources, Simon might have been more successful in adapting and have felt less isolated. His experiences, and those of the other mature students echo the findings of Mallman and Lee (2017) who found that a lack of people of a similar age lead to students feeling that they could not fit in this environment, which left them isolated. Thankfully for Simon, his investment in extra-curricular activities provided a bridge to help him overcome his difficulties. This has important consequences for social adaptation, but also, as highlighted by Simon, there are consequences for academic adaptation. Therefore, social networks can be seen to be essential in supporting mature students, and the wider population of non-traditional students, when their needs are neglected by the institution. Simon continued his answer on belonging by talking about how he felt about the facilities at the university being designed in a one-size-fits-all way, ignoring people like him:

I tried to come in on a Sunday to do some catch up at the library and was really annoyed to find out that on Sundays the student union building is locked and no other building on campus has a microwave. I can't be the only student that brings food to campus (Is everyone else rich!?) I'd definitely feel more connected if I knew I could come at any time of the week AND eat food' (Simon 30+, diary, March, Second Year).

So, for Simon it was a feeling that evolved as time went on. He felt different to other students because he felt his circumstances (caring responsibilities/finances) were not recognised by the institution. Rebecca's comments on the mature student society also reflect a similar theme of being a lesser-value student, which inevitably fed into her lack of general belonging:

**Charlie: Do you go into the mature students' common room? Have you joined?**

I was talking to someone about this the other day, why do they want me to pay £20 to use a room? I appreciate if you want tea and coffee and a locker, but I'm not paying £20 to use a room, why should I? You should provide that facility for mature students anyway, aside from the tea and coffee. You shouldn't have to pay for it, because in that case, why aren't [traditional-age students] paying for their common room? If they really are common rooms then why are you charging me? Because there is a sandwich machine and a toaster in there? (Rebecca 30+, interview, spring, First Year).

So again, the way that institutions make students feel can have an important effect on their level of social adaptation.

## 7.2.2: Fitting in at University

In the first survey, as previously mentioned in this chapter (see Table 7.1 below), proportionately more mature students suggested that they were worried about *fitting in* than their traditional-aged peers when they started university.

Table 7.1: What worries you most about university? (First-Year survey)

	17-20		21-24		25-29		30+		Total	
Accessing support	16	2.1%	2	4.5%					18	2.2%
Being able to attend lectures and seminars	25	3.3%	2	4.5%			1	6.25%	28	3.4%
Fitting in at university	90	12%	6	13.6%	1	8.3%	4	25%	101	12.3%
I have no worries about university	29	3.9%	2	4.5%	2	16.7%	1	6.25%	34	
Managing my finances	87	11.6%	7	15.9%	1	8.3%	3	18.75%	98	11.9%
Organising my study time effectively	195	26%	6	13.6%	4	33.3%	5	31.25%	210	25.6%
The standard of work required	280	37.4%	17	38.6%	3	25%	2	12.5%	302	36.8%
Other	22	2.9%	2	4.5%	1	8.3%			25	3.0%

These concerns about fitting in were discussed by most students in first interviews, regardless of age, but for most of the 17-20 age group, and the younger mature students aged 21-29, this fear had subsided by the time the first interviews took place, a month after they started their degree. At this point, younger students seemed to have adapted comfortably to their learning environment and to have adapted into student networks in their subject area and in the wider student community. Unfortunately, the mature students had not been so successful at adapting into student networks at this stage, nor later in the later, despite their persistence in trying to adapt socially.

Table 7.2: What worries you most about university? (Second-Year survey)

	17-20		21-24		25-29		30+		Missing		Total	
<b>Accessing Support</b>	5	0.8%	3	4.2%					1	11.1%	9	1.3%
<b>Being able to attend lectures and seminars</b>	31	5.2%	7	9.9%	2	8.7%			1	11.1%	41	5.8%
<b>Fitting in at university</b>	8	1.3%	2	2.8%	3	13%	1	12.5%			14	2.0%
<b>I have no worries about university</b>	25	4.2%	4	5.6%	2	8.7%					31	4.4%
<b>Managing my finances</b>	58	9.7%	8	11.3%	3	13.0%	1	12.5%			70	9.9%
<b>Organising my study time effectively</b>	212	35.6%	2	31%	6	26.1%	1	12.5%	2	22.2%	243	34.4%
<b>The standard of work required</b>	231	38.8%	2	29.6%	6	26.1%	4	50%	2	22.2%	264	37.4%
<b>Other</b>	14	2.4%	1	1.4%					2	22.2%	17	2.4%
<b>Missing</b>	11	1.8%	3	4.2%	1	4.3%	1	12.5%	1	11.1%	17	2.4%

However, the proportion of students choosing this response in the Second-Year survey changed notably (see Table 7.2 above). The proportion of traditional-age students concerned about fitting in was reasonably low in the First-Year survey at 12%, but, as shown in interviews, these concerns evaporated quite quickly, demonstrated by the very low proportion citing these concerns in the Second-Year survey (1.3%). Mature students' fears can also be seen to have lessened, with those choosing this answer in the 30+ group reducing by a half and the proportion of 21-24-year olds dropping substantially, from 13.6% in the First Year to 2.8% in the Second Year. The 25-29 age group is the exception here, as concern about fitting in appears to be more, rather than less of a concern to these students (8.3% rising to 13%). This might mean that this group is more vulnerable socially, though the small numbers in the mature student categories could be seen to make variation more volatile. Rising concern about fitting in for students aged 25-29 certainly did not appear to be reflected in the interview and diary data.

In interviews and diary entries there were notable differences in attitudes to fitting in within the mature student group, there was a notable division, which did not follow the age categories used in the large-scale data. None of the younger mature students, Amy & Joanna (21-24), Adam (25-29), Ben, Simon, Sally & Mia (30-39), saw the importance of social adaptation at university. In contrast the older mature students (40+), Rebecca, John and Andrew, desperately wanted to fit in and experience the social side of university. As the older ages have been collapsed, it is difficult to see that there is also a split in the survey responses in the first and second survey responses within the 30+ group. Further analysis revealed that those aged over 40 selected the

fitting in option as their main worry. So, whilst there was not a particularly big variation for different age groups in relation to concerns about fitting in in the first survey (except for those in the 30+ age category) there was a significant difference in the interview and diary data, indicating that integration was a problem across the group, particularly in their First Year. This links to Reay's (2004) research on mature working-class student identities, which suggested that situational factors made it more difficult for students to integrate. It was unfortunate that there were not enough mature students to separate this age group out and to explore this issue on a larger scale. However, I could see that collapsing the older category hid the fact that more students aged over 40 selected 'fitting in' as a concern in both surveys, though numbers in this group were low (n=9 First Year, n=3 Second Year).

Despite these concerns, interviews and diary entries did not suggest that any of these students chose to come to this university because they felt they would fit in. As will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, choosing the right course and the right university was somehow more important to these mature students. Adam (25-29), Sally (30+), Ben (30+) Andrew (30+) and John (30+) all chose the university specifically because of their course or because of the reputation of their department, which was similar to the non-traditional students' attitudes in Christie's research (Christie, 2009). This differs to the findings in Reay's small-scale research (2004), as those students chose a university based on where they felt they would fit in, rather than choosing the best course at the best university. It also became evident in the interviews and diary entries that students' reasons for choosing to study at this university (discussed in the next chapter) had an impact on their adaptation and their negotiation of challenges, particularly some of the mature students. Those who were committed to their chosen subject seemed to cope better when they faced challenges. Although fitting in was mentioned in initial interviews, this was only something these students had considered after they had started.

The feeling that others had negative attitudes towards them, as previously discussed, certainly seemed to impact on students' ability to adapt socially and develop feelings of belonging. For some of these mature students this negativity was based on their perceptions of what younger students might think of them. For other mature students, interactions with younger students informed them of how they were perceived, because of their difference in age. Students' concerns about being older spanned the whole mature student group in interviews and diary entries, even in the 21-24 age group. As previously mentioned, this group had a similar percentage selecting *worries about fitting in* to students in the traditional age group, in the First-Year survey (13.6%) (see Table 7.1), so these comments in interviews were surprising. Nevertheless, as shown in the Second-Year survey, once students in this age group had been at

university for a year, age no longer seemed to matter at all, as they had all integrated with some students on their courses and in the wider student body. In the Second-Year survey they also had the lowest percentage across all age groups for the response 'I was worried about being on my own' (2.8%) (see Appendix 10, Table 7) in answer to the 'strongest feeling about being back' question. In terms of individual experiences, both Amy and Joanna (21-24) suggested that they blended in well with their traditional-aged cohorts, when asked about this in interviews. Although they felt they were different to traditional-age students, they did not believe that anyone actually knew they were older or saw them as different. This demonstrates that adapting socially was easier for this group of mature students, which may also have had a positive effect on their academic adaptation, because of their support network within their courses.

In contrast Adam, who was only a few years older, thought his difference in age had not been noticed, but discovered it had when he tried to blend in with his course peers and neighbours in student halls:

I do get reminded, don't worry! Oh yeah kids come up and go "How old are you?" They don't say hello or anything. I didn't think it was that obvious. I was like shaving and trying to look as young as possible, but no, it did nothing (Adam 25-29, interview, winter, First Year).

This was also apparent in his age group in the surveys, as concerns about fitting in (see Table 7.1 and 7.2) increased from 8.3% in the First Year, to 13% in the Second Year. This suggests that students may not have initially thought that fitting in would be a problem but found that this was actually more difficult once they had been at university for a year, because of their age. The 30+ interview and diary participants did not report anything like this, perhaps because they did not intend, or feel it was possible, to blend in with their cohort. Although Mia (30+) suggested that she felt that she had integrated as a 'mother figure' to the traditional-aged students, whether she intended to or not, though she seemed to like this. It must be noted, that she was in one of the smaller subject cohort groups, unlike the others in her age group, so it may be that this made it easier for her to integrate. As discussed previously, both John (30+) and Andrew (30+) suggested that being taught in smaller groups, in their Second-Year, made a positive difference to their interaction with their traditional-age peers.

As previously mentioned, there was a desire to fit in and feel a sense of belonging amongst all three students aged over 40, though they found fitting-in and finding acceptance was certainly more difficult for them than for traditional-age and younger mature students. Like Mia (30+), Rebecca (40+) found that students also treated her like a mother figure, though she found this added to the weight of her problems. However, when she transferred to a different course, with a smaller group at a different university, she seemed to enjoy being given this role, like Mia. As



discussed earlier, it may be possible that when she enjoyed her learning, she found it easier to belong and accept this role. John (40+) particularly struggled in his First Year, feeling that his traditional-aged peers needed him to explain why he was there, because he was such an anomaly:

You can see them looking at me thinking 'Who is that old guy, why is he studying? Is he a postgrad?' You know I've gone to the trouble, when asked, to explain my circumstances (John 40+, interview, winter, First Year).

However, John and Andrew (40+) made comments in both interviews and diaries about being old enough to be traditional-age students' fathers, believing this might be the reason that they were not accepted. Neither of them ever mentioned being allocated a 'parent' role though, unlike their female counterparts, which demonstrates an interesting difference in terms of gender and age, which should be further explored in future research.

Belonging became a notable feature in the interviews and diary entries. As belonging could be the optimal measure of social adaptation, these findings were seen to be integral in understanding different levels of adaptation. Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1984) was felt to be particularly relevant here, in the sense of the life experience the mature students had gained. In some respects, their life experience gave them an advantage, but in others, it meant that they were different, lacking in the social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that would give them power and connections in this environment (e.g. shared experience of leaving parents/sixth-form). Therefore, it appeared that there were both institutional and attitudinal issues involved in the process of forming a student identity and developing a sense of belonging.

As belonging emerged as an issue in the First-Year interviews a direct question on belonging was included in the diaries towards the end of their Second Year. None of the students said that they did not feel like they belonged, and their comments suggested that definitions of belonging are very varied. In interviews it became apparent that, for many of the older mature student groups, belonging was often viewed as an academic thing (e.g. being accepted by their department, or seen as good at their subject). For the traditional-aged students, there was a very social aspect to their belonging, as shown in Emma's answer:

**Do you feel a sense of belonging at university at the moment?**

I do yes, because I get on with all of my course mates and have gone out with them several times across the course of the term. I feel really in place at university and I feel like I've really settled into living away from home and have managed to make the student house feel like a comfortable place to stay, as opposed to just somewhere to rent. I definitely have felt that this year and term I have begun to feel more of a sense of belonging (Emma 17-20, diary, March, Second Year)

For others it was about belonging both academically and socially, and being part of the university, as a whole. This is demonstrated in Anna's response:

I do feel a sense of belonging at university, my studies are going well and I have very recently gained the role of vice-captain in [my sporting] club which makes me feel liked and that I belong there. (Anna 17-20, Diary, March, Second Year)

Anna presented a deep sense of belonging, which seemed to emanate from her membership of a sporting society, throughout her studies. In contrast, many of the mature students only identified with academic belonging, such as Adam and Ben who wrote:

On an academic/intellectual level, yes, I do feel a great sense of belonging in the uni, but I guess I would probably feel that way towards most universities. If that was put to one side though, I don't think I would feel attached to the university itself, especially [the city] in general (Adam 25-29, diary, March, Second Year).

The more I study the more I feel I belong here. My confidence has been boosted by my Semester 1 marks too (Ben 30+, diary, March, Second Year).

As all the mature students cited academic belonging to explain how they felt, and all traditional-age students cited social reasons, this suggests that this difference is attributed to a student's age, rather than a case of variations between individuals. It is also apparent that if students feel they belong, or fit in, either academically or socially, this can have a positive effect on their student identity, which will be demonstrated in more detail in the next section.

#### 7.2.2.1: Social Isolation

In line with the theme of fitting in, it was certainly evident in interviews and diary entries that mature students appeared to experience more isolation than their younger peers in this research, clearly lacking in any sense of social habitus (Bourdieu, 1984) or social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). For many of these mature students it appeared that their ability to adapt was hampered by some of the barriers which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 9, such as personal or financial responsibilities. In addition, because traditional-aged students were the dominant age group in all departments, this seemed to have a specific impact on mature students' attitude to their adaptation, socially. Experiences of social isolation appeared to be significantly different for traditional-aged and mature students, from early in the research. However, there also appeared to be a big difference in the mature students' experiences of social isolation. Whilst all the mature students experienced some isolation, due to their lack of fit, there were two separate sets of experiences within this group, as previously mentioned. Younger mature students (21-39) appeared to intentionally isolate themselves and older mature students (40+) felt that they were forced into isolation by their younger peers.

Age appeared to be a key factor in whether this isolation dissipated, continued or was magnified during their First Year. Two of the traditional-aged (17-20) students in the sample reported feeling isolated in their first days at university. Emma (17-20) felt particularly lonely in her first week, as she found it difficult to integrate with her flatmates, who were all studying medical degrees together and had started a week before her. The other two traditional-age students were surprised that they did not feel isolated, in contrast. Once Emma had attended her lectures, classes and Freshers' events, she explained that she quickly developed a new social network, like the other two traditional-aged students. These networks were seen to be supportive, both academically and personally, as well as an integral part of their enjoyment at university. Conversely, the other traditional-age female, who was the only ethnic minority student in this age group, and the mature students in the sample, who all felt isolated in the first days, were more likely to continue feeling like they were isolated at university, particularly in their First Year. Rebecca (40+) explains the difficulties she experienced when trying to assimilate socially with students on from her cohort:

**Charlie: Have you changed?**

I think particularly now, particularly with the counselling, I haven't changed enough. I think my expectations were off. It hasn't been what I thought it would be. It is actually a lot more isolating than I thought it was going to be.

**Charlie: When I first met you, you were quite confident, quite assured, so you don't feel like you are that person anymore?**

No, not at all.

**Charlie: What are the features of that isolation, is it because you aren't like everyone else or because you haven't made those connections?**

I mean I didn't expect to be everyone's buddy, everyone's friend, you know there is a massive age difference. I knew that, but nobody will talk to you (Rebecca 40+, interview, spring, First Year).

Rebecca's personal responsibilities also impacted on her ability to attend Freshers' and society events, as well as attend university, so her lack of integration had a significant effect on her ongoing attitude to her course and to university in general:

**How easy was it to adapt to being away from university?**

I didn't miss it at all, which makes me wonder if I should even be there in the first place, avoidance is a wonderful thing especially when backed up with a genuine medical problem... I thought I could cope but I am not. Peer mentors are no help - they are 19 - and lecturers are lecturers not friends or peers, so who do mature students turn too?' (Rebecca 40+, Diary, January, First Year)

The search for someone 'like them' is a feature for all the students in the 40+ group, with Rebecca, John and Andrew all discussing their failed attempts to find common ground with other students. In contrast, the younger mature students seemed to actively choose social isolation,

as discussed later in this section. This has important implications for how HE institutions manage mature students' expectations, as it is evident that there is a distinct variation in what the mature students in this research wanted and needed.

For the students in the 21-24, 25-29 and 30-39 age groups, choosing social isolation was a distinguishing feature in the interview and diary data. For Joanna (21-24), Simon (30-39) and Sally (30-39), who had caring responsibilities for young children, isolating themselves from other students seemed to be a necessity, in order to cope with study and caring demands. Sally's (30-39) account is reminiscent of the experiences of many mature students with caring responsibilities (Mannay & Morgan, 2013; Reay, et al., 2010):

I am here primarily to learn and not to socialise...my focus is, once I have finished my lectures, getting back home to my family really. It is difficult enough trying to schedule enough reading time and revision without anything else, like going out and being able to do the workload anyway (Sally 30-39, interview, winter, First Year).

However, even those without caring responsibilities, like Amy (21-24), Adam (25-29) and Ben (30-39) felt that they needed to isolate themselves from peers on their course and traditional-aged flatmates, so that they could make the best use of their time at university. Amy explains:

Because I know am a lot older as well... I just wanna get on and study and I thought maybe First Years who are living together maybe probably wouldn't have been like that they would be hanging around together all the time and I thought I would probably feel isolated living like that (Amy 21-24, interview, winter, First Year).

Consequently these mature students seem to have very different ideas about how much they need to adapt, when compared to both the older mature students and the traditional-age students. Similarly, when asked about who had supported him in his studies, Ben (30-39) maintained that he only sought support from lecturers and seminar leaders, stating: *'Other than that, I work alone'* (Diary, December, Second Year). Adam also quickly isolated himself after initially making an effort to socialise, in the first weeks:

I just want to focus. I need more time to process things. That just means I have to sacrifice going out and stuff a little bit more (Adam 25-29, interview, winter, First Year).

Unlike the other traditional-aged students in the sample, this was also acknowledged by Leila in her diary entry, below:

I haven't been as social due to university work, but also an ounce of laziness. But I have promised myself to change this attitude in the 2nd semester because sometimes it's easy to feel lonely, and I don't need to be lonely because there are people I could spend time with, but I choose not to most of the time (Leila 17-20, Diary, December, First Year)

It could be argued that, like the mature students, who were a very small group at this university, Leila may also have felt apprehensive about fitting in because she was also from a minority group

(Black British). However, unlike the older mature students, for Leila this was seen by her as a temporary coping strategy and one which she did not intend to continue. In comparison, isolation continued for all the mature students, well into their Second Year. Doman & Roux (2010) maintained that younger people were more prone to loneliness, however in this research the opposite was the case, with older students (particularly over 40) being more likely to experience prolonged loneliness than most of the traditional-aged students, who seemed to adapt relatively quickly. This formed part of many older mature students' disappointments about university, but for some of those who had chosen isolation, it appeared to be something that they felt positive about, having no regrets about making this choice.

In contrast to those who actively chose isolation, mature students aged over 40 felt that they were forced to accept isolation, as a result of feeling socially excluded by their peers, at this university. Unlike many of the other mature students, Andrew (40+) joined several societies, though his financial responsibilities, like many mature students (James, et al., 2013), meant he had little time to socialise between his paid employment and studying on a very demanding course. His initial commitment to these societies was driven by the desire to find common ground with other students, as like many of the other mature students he felt this was lacking from his relationship with peers on his course. As Reay (2004) and Read et al. (2003) highlighted, some mature students feel that belonging is important for their overall experience of undergraduate study. Perceptions were important in students' assessment of their university experience. Andrew demonstrates this in his comments:

They have had events which I've gone to 'cos I think it kind of provides a peer group based on shared interest, kindred spirits... based on kind of common ground, which I have got a lot of with people on my course but I think because of my age they don't really see it that much. ... I suppose these guys are a few weeks away from living with their parents and they think of someone like me as their parents, their parents' friends... they ask if they can sit with me, I don't know whether they do that with people of their own age in lectures. It is harder in the lecture, I suppose people are living in halls together and getting to know each other. I kind of feel like an outsider (Andrew 40+, interview, winter First Year).

What is interesting about Andrew's account here is that when he talks about the rejection he experiences, he introduces reasons that he is to blame for this rejection: his age; for being like their parents. He later suggests that it might just be down to his own social anxiety.

This feeling was a common theme for all three of the students who were aged over 40. Rebecca explains that she felt consistently rejected in lectures and seminars whenever she tried to interact with her traditional-aged peers:

If you open the conversation, I don't know if they think you are invading their privacy, or they don't want...In my heart I know I could sit here and not speak to anyone for three

years, get my head down and get my degree, but that is not the point... I think it must be an age thing, it has got to be an age thing. I don't know if they don't want to or don't feel the need to (Rebecca 40+, interview, winter, First Year).

On one occasion, after a prolonged period of absence, Rebecca discusses a rare and unexpected occasion when one of her traditional-aged peers approached her in the library to ask how she was. Unfortunately, by this point her continued rejection was so engrained, that she begins debating why they would ask how she was and say that they missed her in classes when they had never spoken to her before, in a similar way to Andrew blaming himself for feeling this way. This reflects Gorard's (2002) observations about feeling like they are a deviant version of student, because they are not traditional-aged.

Again, as with the feelings with the younger mature students, this feeling was the same, regardless of gender. Rebecca's comments above, are largely echoed here in John's discussion of trying to engage with his peers:

I am not going to be an active member of my cohort... they are all aged 19, they all do their own thing together. I've tried to make inroads in terms of setting up a study group in our free time and they turned up once for a chat and have not really engaged since. So I have really set my mind now that I come in just attend my seminars, extract what I need from the library (John 40+, diary, spring, First Year).

So, in this respect, isolation was seen largely as a negative, unwanted position to be in, resulting from the rejection they felt following interactions with their younger peers. In addition, this was not only experienced early on, during their First Year, but this rejection continued throughout their First Year, following consistent attempts to engage. For both Rebecca (30+) and John (30+), this resulted in them experiencing mental health difficulties at the end of the First Year. Although his attendance was affected by a combination of his feelings of isolation and the commute, resulting in his subsequent mental health problems, John was able to continue to negotiate his study and continued to the Second Year of his course. For Rebecca the strain of depression proved too much, impacting on both her attendance and her ability to study. She dropped out at the end of the second term, having only completed 40% of the required assessments.

These findings provide a more detailed picture of the role of social isolation in mature students' learning experiences at university. Whilst difficulties adapting to the university setting are often viewed negatively (Foster, 2009; Ryan & Glenn, 2004), it is evident that for some mature students, isolation can be positive in terms of success and retention. When isolation is the result of choice it appears to have an emancipatory effect, helping students cope with the demands of university. While for others, isolation is the result of a general lack of belonging and the mismatch of culture. These findings also support previous findings that isolation from social

exclusion can be very harmful in terms of developing learner identities (Doman & Roux, 2010; Reay, 2004), which in Rebecca's case contributed to her dropping out.

In line with Foster's findings (2009) almost all the mature students expressed annoyance at the way in which their younger peers behaved, both whilst in university and outside of it. This could be seen as a justification for younger mature students isolating themselves and a reaction from the older mature students, who felt rejected. Indeed, this appeared to be a blanket rejection of traditional-age culture from all the mature students involved in the interview and diary phase. As discussed earlier, when asked about going to Fresher's week activities, all the younger and older mature students implied that they were not keen to go out drinking with other students, because they had 'done it all before' when they were younger. The following examples show the consistency of this feeling from both older and younger mature students:

The content of the chatter, [ ] initially it was asking the same things over and over again, and I was like 'Oh for goodness sake', ... at 12 at night they go mental, and I have my phone charging next to my bed and I can hear my phone just going 'bing,bing,bing' and my husband is like "can you f'king turn that thing off!" and then I miss something important ... maybe it is just me being an adult and them being teenagers (Rebecca 30+, interview, winter, First Year).

I do feel that sometimes I am a bit of a fish out of water. Sometimes you are there and there is a mentality of giggling and talking over the lecturer, which annoyed me a little bit (Sally 30+, interview, winter, First Year).

In the canteen we were talking about this guy, he was a bit introverted. I said "Well he is young he has probably never left home before and is feeling vulnerable. Just give him time". And then one of them goes, "I remember one time when my mum and dad went out and left me for over a week once". I didn't get what he meant and then the others were like "Oh yeah they once left me alone for 9 days" and then I realised: yeah it has been 9 years since I have lived with my parents (Adam 25-29, interview, winter, First Year).

As these students progressed through their degree, and the traditional-aged students matured, this frustration largely dissipated. By the Second Year, possibly because traditional-aged students had generally turned their attention to trying to get good grades, the difference between the attitudes of mature students and traditional-aged students seemed to lessen somewhat.

Students' identities are also important here as there appeared to be a realisation for some of the mature students that they needed to change, in order to successfully integrate. John (40+) demonstrates this in his interview in the middle of his Second Year. He explained that he reached a crisis point soon after starting his Second Year, where his family expressed their concerns about his health and happiness, because of his attitude towards his degree. After this point he

maintained he made a conscious effort to “*get the stick out of my ass*” as he went through a process of “*metamorphosis*”, clearing all his military equipment out the garage and reminding himself that he was not a commissioned officer any more. This enabled him to take a more relaxed approach, which meant him changing the clothes he wore to university, growing facial hair, being less dominant in class and less critical of everyone around him. As a result, he found he started to make friends on his course.

#### 7.2.2.2: Friendships at University

Friendships at university seemed to be significant in helping students adapt to academic demands and in terms of developing a feeling of belonging at university. Although most of the mature students did not prioritise social adaptation, it was apparent that friends at university were important for all but two of the 13 students involved in the interview and diary phase.

The main difference between the age groups was how important friends were to the students’ experiences at university. For younger students, *being with their friends* at university was the second most popular response after *looking forward to learning* (see Table 7.4 below) in the question about how students felt about coming back to university. In the 21-24 age group, answers followed a similar pattern with *looking forward to learning* being the most popular answer and *being with friends* the second most popular answer. However, no one over the age of 24 selected this answer at all, which suggests that for the mature students over this age, having friends at university was less important.

Table 7.4: Strongest feeling about coming back to university? (Second-Year survey)

Age Group	17-20		21-24		25-29		30+		Missing		Total
Looking forward to being with my friends	196	32.9%	11	15.5%							29.3%
Looking forward to learning	246	41.3%	38	53.5%	16	69.6%	4	50%	6	67.6%	43.9%
Worried about being on my own	19	3.2%	2	2.8%	1	4.3%	1	12.5%			3.3%
Worried about my studies	115	19.3%	18	25.4%	5	21.7%	2	25%	2	22.2%	20.1%
other	16	2.7%	1	1.4%			1	12.5%	1	11.1%	2.7%
missing	3	0.5%	1	1.4%	1	4.3%					5

Though, academic adaptation appeared to have much more to do with friendship that I believe these students credited it with. Rebecca’s comments highlight this here, when she laments the loss of her friend from her course:



My second source of support, another mature on the course has decided it's not for her and is dropping out. I am gutted. Finally found someone on my level and they won't be here after Christmas. She kept me going. I frankly don't want to be in lectures without her, she is a great laugh and I don't feel like such an outsider with all the teenagers in the room (Rebecca 30+, diary, December, First Year)

Most of the students in the interview and diary research mentioned the importance of having someone to run module information past. Adam (25-29) and Joanna (21-24) both made several comments about the help that they regularly sought from a single friend, from their course, who acted as their 'study buddy'. As Joanna demonstrates here:

I've developed a relationship with one of the girls on my course and we go to the library every day together, Monday to Friday ... She has been like my friend from the First Year. Without her, oh gosh, I don't know what I would do. She helps me out and I help her out too, so we support each other (Joanna 21-24, interview, spring, Second Year).

So, it became evident that even if students only had one friend, this was enough to help them negotiate the demands of university, even if they were not fully integrated socially.

Therefore, there seems to be a distinct difference across these age groups in how friendships at university are seen. For traditional-age students seeing friends seems to be the most important part of the university (as shown in the survey results). For mature students friends were not the focus of their university experience but they were an important source of support.

### 7.3: Summary of Findings

At the start of this chapter it was assumed that students who had adapted both socially and academically might 'survive' better (Piaget, 1936) and perform better (Dewey, 1938; Gill, 1993) than students who only adapted in one of these domains in HE. What was very evident was that mature students certainly adapted differently to university life, compared to traditional-age students. The way in which they adapted, the time it took for them to adapt and the levels of adaptation varied between these two groups. In addition, there were differences in mature students' adaption, within the mature student group according to their age, which also affected the way they adapted, the timing of their adaption and the level of adaptation they achieved. Adaptation techniques were much more likely to change over the course of mature students' undergraduate study, than for traditional-age students, who seemed to embrace most aspects of academic and social adaptation as soon as they started university. In contrast mature students seemed to resist some aspects of their adaptation, mostly social adaptation, though institutional issues also made it more difficult for them in this respect.

Academic adaptation was clearly a priority for the mature students in this research and, on the whole, adapting this way seemed to be of no detriment in terms of their perceived performance on their degree. Certainly, for the younger mature students, they felt that by neglecting social adaptation they were able to fully focus their precious time on their studies, which aligns well with Schuller and Watson's (2009) ideas about the role of life-stage and participation in education. In terms of vulnerability of dropping out, however, it could be argued that the mature students who were aged over 40 were detrimentally affected by their lack of social adaptation. This was because their experiences of isolation seemed to affect their learner identities and their sense of belonging in the institution. Whilst imposter syndrome did not seem to hamper them in the same way as it appears to have hampered the mature students in Chapman's (2017) research, social isolation certainly seemed to dampen their motivation for their degree, which was arguably more damaging for Rebecca, who dropped out, and John who considered dropping out at numerous points over the first two years of his degree. Therefore, in this respect a student's age certainly did seem to matter, with older mature students being at a disadvantage as a direct result of institutional ignorance and peer rejection. The design of Freshers' week activities and the delivery of teaching also did not seem to help to lessen this, as the institution appeared to focus on the traditional-age, white, middle-class majority. This meant that students from minority groups were forced to either adapt away from their own cultural norms, or risk exclusion if they chose not to.

Where mature students did seem to have an advantage, academically, was in terms of the organisational skills they brought with them from employment. Although organising study time was initially a concern for them, this was much less of a concern for most mature student groups in the Second-Year survey, which demonstrated that the mature students who discussed the benefits of being organised were representative of the wider cohort. The only mature student age-group that did not appear to be organised in the same way, were the younger mature students' group (21-24) who seemed to be more similar to the traditional-age students in the survey, although this was not borne out of the interview and diary data. As a result, it seemed that having to juggle their personal responsibilities and their academic responsibilities effectively actually helped mature students, rather than hinder their academic adaptation. In contrast this was something that traditional-age students found more challenging in their discussions in interviews and diary entries. However, as will be discussed in Chapter 9, trying to adapt academically was complicated by juggling many barriers for some mature students, which made this a difficult process for them.

The other institutional issues that seemed to make academic adaptation difficult was that the design of teaching appeared to be less interactive, in line with the comments from Dewey (1938) and Gill (1993). This was not just an issue for mature students, as it was also noted by traditional-age students. However, whilst the traditional-age students seemed to be prepared for this and adapted quite quickly, the mature students took longer to adapt to being receivers of knowledge, rather than having a role in the consideration and the construction of this knowledge. It is likely that the conflict of the adult and child roles in education (Rogers, 2003) created difficulties for mature students, who struggled to lose their adult selves in this type of hierarchy. As a result, I believe it took longer for the mature students' learner identities to be positively altered by their engagement in learning (Dewey, 1938). I suspect that some of these students would argue that their learning identities were not positively altered, largely because they never felt they were given the opportunity to actively engage in their learning by the end of their Second Year. Although many of the mature students in the interview and diary phase seemed to do much better than they initially expected, there seemed to be a link between age and the time it took *to get used to what was required*, which was evident in the Second-Year survey. Being older did not necessarily mean that performance declined in respect of the students in this research, though older mature students were often more worried about doing well in their studies (the standard of work required), which possibly reflects Gorard's (2002) observation that older students feel like they are deviant learners, because they are well past the traditional age of participation. Therefore, they might feel they have more to prove. Younger mature students certainly seemed to be slightly more positive about their adaptation than the older mature student age groups, which may mean this group is better at adapting. Whilst this may be an effect only relevant to this cohort, rather than a generalisable difference, it seems sensible that as this group may have had experience of work this will have impacted on their confidence. Also, as leaving school was not long ago, they probably could also remember how to respond to academic demands.

In terms of social adaptation, age did seem to matter. Most of the mature students in the interview and diary phase did not believe that social networks were valuable, though it was clear that they benefitted from having social connections at university, even if they had only one or two connections with other students. In contrast the traditional-age students had a larger network of friends at university and this seemed to make them better adapted than some of the mature students. It did appear that struggles to form networks made university life harder for older mature students, but for others the handful of friends or the single person at university was all they felt they needed. Traditional-age students, who were generally away from their

parents for the first time, had a very different experience socially than the mature students, who generally experienced minimal changes to their domestic life. Whilst the younger mature students did seem to eventually adapt to some degree socially, despite their initial reluctance to do so, their instrumental attitude to pursuing their degree seemed to shape the type of adaptation they achieved. Although they perceived that they were very successful in their studies, I believe that they achieved this without being fully adapted to the HE environment.

In conclusion, achieving full adaptation (social and academic) does not seem to be important in terms of achieving good grades on an undergraduate degree. However, students who are fully adapted probably leave university having had a better experience than those who do not. They also seem to have a less anxious experience at university, because they have larger support networks. In this research, full adaptation was generally only achieved by traditional-age students.

# Chapter 8: Mature Student Motivation Results

## Introduction

Motivations can be seen to provide an important function in terms of supporting undergraduate students' adaptation in HE and to some degree, they offset the challenges presented by barriers, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. In this chapter consideration will be given to why these mature students participated, what they hoped to gain through participation and whether this differed to traditional-age students, to answer the question: 'Do mature students have different motivations for study and if so, why is this the case?' Then the discussion turns to changes in motivation to see how motivation influenced mature students in the case study cohort, to address the question: 'Do motivations change over the course of their undergraduate degrees?'

Carré's (2000) model of motives for participating in education proved to be very accurate in assessing not only the mature student motivations, but also the traditional-age student motivations. To some degree, three of the extrinsic motives from Carré's model form the basis for the first part of this chapter: economic motivation is considered in terms of participating to gain employment, gaining skills for professional purposes is considered in terms of seeking fulfilling employment and finally, participating at the instruction of others is discussed in relation to social influences. In the next section, two of Carré's intrinsic motives are considered, though as discussed in the literature chapter on motivation there was a lot of cross-over between the terms, pleasure gained from being in the educational environment and learning for its own sake, this section used the headings intellectual fulfilment and achievement motives instead. The last section of this chapter will consider whether these mature students' motivations changed during the first two years of their undergraduate studies.

## 8.1: Understanding Mature Student Motivation

I collected data in surveys, student interviews and diary entries to examine the motivations of different-aged students. Initial motivation was the focus in the first survey and in the first interviews and in subsequent interviews and diary entries I asked questions on motivation to consider whether their motivations changed and, if so, how this changed. As the students provided a running record of their motivations, I was able to use this to inform both the

questions and provide suitable answers to see how the interview sample's experiences related to the wider cohort of students.

The first questionnaire asked students what their main motivation was for coming to university and these answers were explored in the interviews that took place with interview participants in their first term. There were only four missing answers (0.5%) in the survey. Students were asked to select just one reason from the available options to this question in the survey. Question and answer options were developed using the literature on motivation and refined following the pilot research, shown in Table 8.1 below. Students who felt that these answers did not explain their motivations were given the option to explain their motivation using the '*other reason*' option.

Table 8.1: Age and Main Motivation for Coming to University? (First-Year survey)

Age Group	17-20		21-24		25-29		30+		Total	
<b>I didn't know what else to do</b>	20	2.7%	1	2.3%					21	2.6%
<b>I need this qualification for a particular job</b>	174	23.2%	13	29.5%	6	50%	1	6.25%	194	23.6%
<b>I want to make my family proud</b>	20	2.7%	3	6.8%	1	8.3%	1	6.25%	25	3%
<b>I wanted a challenge</b>	35	4.7%	4	9.1%	2	16.7%	4	25%	45	5.5%
<b>It was the natural next step</b>	371	49.5%	13	29.5%	1	8.3%			385	46.9%
<b>To increase my earning potential</b>	99	13.2%	8	18.20%	2	16.7%	4	25%	113	13.8%
<b>Other reason</b>	26	3.5%	2	4.5%			6	37.5%	34	4.1%
<b>Missing</b>	4	0.5%							4	0.5%

As seen in Table 8.1, mature students, as a collective group, spread their answers across the full range of motivations and many made good use of the *other reason* response to explain their initial motives. When the mature students were broken into different age groups, however, this demonstrated that there were notable differences according to their ages. For example, the 25-29 age group answers were much more focussed on the *needing this qualification for a particular job* response and the 30+ age group's answers were more evenly split between *other reasons*, *I wanted a challenge* and *to increase my earning potential*. In contrast, whilst traditional-age

students used all of the available responses, their answers were much more concentrated on the *natural next step* motive (46.9%), although there were many young mature students (21-24) who also used this answer. Many traditional-age students also selected reasons related to paid employment, such as *I need this qualification for a particular job* (23.6%) and *to increase my earning potential* (13.8%), which were also commonly selected by mature student age groups. Also, the older mature student group were much more likely to make use of the *other reasons* response than traditional-age or younger mature student groups. These differences will be discussed in detail in later sections.

I coded these initial motivations as either instrumental or intellectual motivations, as motivation in the literature appeared to fall into these two themes. However, it was clear from interviews and diaries that students often had a range of motivating factors that emerged from both instrumental and intellectual motives, rather than a single motivation, as asked for in the survey. This was particularly evident for mature students, as was the case in Elliot and Brna's (2009) study, and for students with caring responsibilities (Hinton-Smith, 2012), but less common for students aged 17-20.

To provide context to these motivations, I also collected information on why students selected the case study university, in the First-Year survey. This was intended to assess whether students were particularly motivated by their degree course (Osborne, et al., 2004), the features of the university (Christie, 2009; Reay, et al., 2010) or the proximity of the university in relation to their home (Callender, et al., 2014; Elliot & Brna, 2009), as these were all issues that appeared to affect motivation, although they are also relevant to some of the adaption issues discussed in the last chapter. The answers to this question are illustrated in Table 8.2, below. In terms of age, it is apparent from the responses in Table 8.2 that *open days and liking the campus or the city* did not influence older mature students, as only students aged 17-20 and 21-24 selected these responses. As in the motivation question, older mature students were more likely to select *other reasons*, such as: 'Tutors involved in real world research' to explain why they chose this university. In contrast the younger students' *other reasons* showed more basic decision-making, such as simply securing a university place. For example, two of the comments given by students in the 17-20 group were: 'Gave me an unconditional offer' and 'Most interesting/reputable course in clearing'. Academic quality also seemed to be more important for older mature students in line with Jenkins' (2017) research and like the young non-traditional student in Christie's (2009) research. Although proximity was highlighted in the literature as more of an issue for mature students (Callender, et al., 2014; Elliot & Brna, 2009), this was not really reflected in these responses as an important consideration.

Table 8.2: Why Did You Choose to Study at this University? (First-Year survey)

Age Group	17-20	21-24	25-29	30+	Total				
The open day	97	13%	2	4.5%					12.1%
The course	204	27.2%	11	25%	1	8.3%	4	25%	26.8%
The campus	27	3.6%	3	6.8%					3.7%
The city	11	1.5%	2	4.5%					1.6%
The reputation	281	37.5%	15	34.1%	6	50%	8	50%	37.8%
Proximity to home	46	6.1%	6	13.6%	1	8.3%	1	6.25%	6.6%
It was recommended	42	5.6%	4	9.1%	2	16.7%	1	6.25%	6%
Missing	4	0.5%							0.5%
Other reason	37	4.9%	1	2.3%	2	16.7%	2	12.5%	5.1%

However, in interviews, many of the mature students said that they chose this university partly because of where it was in relation to their home, but mostly because of the academic reasons highlighted in the survey, such as reputation. This might have been because they felt their choices were already restricted to local universities, so they did not think of this when asked about reasons for their choices. Sally (30+), for example chose it because of a significant discovery that had been made by her department and John (30+), because he had met someone who worked in his department when he had been volunteering in his chosen subject. The younger students, in comparison, focussed on why they chose their subject when they were asked why they came to this university. However, as the younger age groups also selected reputation in large numbers, academic quality was important to them, but it was evident that they had not focussed on this aspect as much as the mature students had.

These themes will be explored in more detail in the next few sections which look at the age differences in instrumental and intellectual motivations.

## 8.2: Instrumental Motivations

As previously mentioned, instrumental or extrinsic motivation influences students to engage in HE to gain external reward such as money, or praise. I have included motivations in this section that relate to employment gains, fulfilment in employment and social expectations. Although I have separated these experiences across these themes, it is important to mention here that there is inevitably some cross-over with discussions in these sections. Employment motivations for example often include both a general desire to improve prospects as well as seeking more



fulfilling experiences in employment. Also, whilst social expectations can influence students to use HE to make a better life for their family, it is also important to acknowledge that students were also often looking for fulfilment in employment, whilst also providing better outcomes for others. Therefore, whilst these categories separate motivations, the intention is not to ignore the fluid and inter-connected nature of these motivations.

### 8.2.1: Gaining Employment

Gaining employment and a good salary was an important motivating factor for many students when they enrolled at university. This was evident from both the survey findings and in the interviews. In the survey, the answers that were designed to capture employment motivations were: *I need this qualification for a particular job* and the more general *To increase my earning potential*. Students in the interview and diary phase were asked to expand on their answers at their first interview to extend my understanding of the survey answers. This answer was selected across the age ranges, suggesting that most students identified with the idea of an undergraduate degree leading to a better wage, which reflects the employment rhetoric in government policy (Her Majesty's Government, 2016). Anna's comments in interview, for example, illustrate how embedded her initial motives for career advancement were:

We have been learning more about the different disciplines in [my subject] which is quite interesting because you can get an idea of what career you want to go into after your degree.

**CS: Yes, in your first questionnaire you put that you were motivated by increasing your earning potential. The idea of work is still in your mind; that has not stopped?**

Yes, I've been trying to get work experience and voluntary experience for my CV and I've definitely got work in mind. (Anna 17-20, interview, spring, First Year).

The 'other reasons' given by the traditional-age group (17-20) related to employability and enjoyment of a particular subject or enjoyment of learning in general. However, *Increasing earning potential* was important across all age groups and it was particularly notable for those in the 30+ age group, where 25% of students selected this response. This may have been because people in this age group might have found that this was a point in their working life where they felt a degree was the only way they could improve their income, as highlighted by McVitty and Morris (2012) and in line with Schuller & Watson's (2009) life stages. Simon's (30+) experiences are a perfect example of this, as he explains here why a degree was so important for accessing suitable employment:

I had never finished my degree, which makes it hard in the professional world to get by on a high school degree. And I'd always would have loved to have been [working in this subject area], but I thought having not gotten my undergrad, that door was closed. In [our area] you have to get an undergrad before you apply to [do the additional training for this job] (Simon 30+, interview, winter, Second Year).

Some of the 'other comments' from mature students added some weight to this idea, as they related to changing or improving their current career. However, there was no consideration of this motive from any of the other students aged 30+ in the interview and diary phase. Indeed no students discussed the earnings premium associated with gaining a degree, as discussed in the literature (Kearns, 2014; Walker & Zhu, 2013; Adnett & Slack, 2007). Gaining employment was important for Joanna (21-24), who was a lone-parent, though she did not select an answer related to employment in the survey. For Joanna, gaining employment and a good salary was important, essentially because she believed that it would lift her and her son out of poverty, as Hinton-Smith (2012) highlighted was important for many lone parents. Consequently, the idea of using a degree to merely gain employment or access higher earnings appears to have been too crude for mature students, who highlighted more complex motives for their participation.

### 8.2.2: Access to Fulfilling Employment

In terms of pursuing fulfilling employment, there was less variation across the mature and traditional-age groups. Often this related to a specific career that students had set their sights on. Table 8.1 highlights that for students in the 25-29 age group, their foremost motivation was linked to getting *a particular job* (50%). Adam's (25-29) motivation was ignited by the belief he should look for a more fulfilling career, because he felt frustrated by the job he was doing:

I had a number of jobs, but my main job was [skilled manual]. I got an apprenticeship in that and I ended up doing that for about six years. And it was reasonable money and stuff, but I just couldn't stand it.

**Charlie: Why, what couldn't you stand about it?**

So, it's weird really, some of it was I guess the type of people that I was with, I guess, without making it personal. But, I just felt like I didn't belong there all the time. And, I don't know, I feel like, as I got older, and I got more curious about certain things, I felt like I was becoming more suited to different types of jobs and, I guess maybe through that feeling that I should be somewhere else. That made me feel that I should leave the job ... I could be fulfilling a different purpose in life. (Adam 25-29, interview, winter, First Year).

Mature students in other age groups also cited fulfilling employment as an initial motivation in their interviews. Although Sally (30+) had young children they were not her main motivation, unlike the other parents discussed in the next section. This was possibly because she had already had a successful career so felt that she did not need to prove anything to herself, or anyone else,

and did not need to improve her income. She explained that she wanted to do something that she found fulfilling:

I have not come to university to further my career in that sense, it is just taking me in a completely different direction. I was very accomplished in what I did: I had my own events company, I worked with [name of celebrity] and a lot of celebrities. But it wasn't fulfilling in the sense that, I have always been passionate about [my subject]. I got to a point where I was really successful in what I was doing but I wasn't enjoying it necessarily, so this is something I have always been passionate about so I thought, 'Do you know what, if you never give it a go then you will never know' (Sally 30+, winter, First Year).

The *particular job* response also appeared to be important in the two younger age groups. This was also discussed by Bethany, in her first interview, as she had selected this answer in the survey. She reported that she selected a joint degree course because she felt it gave her a broader academic background so that she would have a better chance of getting into her chosen career:

I thought if I've got the [subject a qualification] and the [subject b] aspect of it, it probably puts me in higher stead for a career, rather than just the police. So, it wasn't basically literally a policing degree, it took me further (Bethany, 17-20, winter, First Year).

It was also apparent that this answer was chosen more in certain subjects, although differences were not particularly pronounced. Psychology had the highest percentage selecting this at 32.3%, though as this only represented ten students and these were completed online, this may not be representative of the wider body of psychology students. However, Leila (17-20) who was studying Psychology, shed some light on this through her diary comments:

**What is motivating you to attend university at the moment?**

The fact that I have a career goal, which is to become a counselling psychologist. Although, university in my family wasn't an option. It is an opportunity I have always wanted to take with both hands because I know how it will mould me career wise, but mentally and socially as an individual. So holistically I would say the benefits of attending are what motivate me (Leila 17-20, diary, February, First Year).

Therefore, having a specific career goal was something that all four traditional-age students discussed. Whilst most of the mature students wanted to improve their career prospects and knew which area they wanted to work in, no one in this group had a specific job they were motivated to achieve. Although Adam's explanation provides compelling evidence that experiences in low-level employment can propel mature students towards education, once they feel they are mature enough to negotiate it, as acknowledged by Wager (1989). Sally's comments also illustrate that even well-paid employment can become dissatisfying, so HE provides a much-needed lifeline for adults to change their career, so that they can gain enjoyment by using education to access fulfilling employment.

### 8.2.3: Social Influence

The research findings suggested that some students were following the expected path in education, perhaps acting on suggestions from family members or teachers, or following the same route in education as their friends, siblings or parents. As previously discussed, Table 8.1 above highlights that the response *It was the natural next step* was much more common in the two younger age groups, which links with the literature on social expectations and is in keeping with their stage of the life-course (White, 2007; Schuller & Watson, 2009). The younger two groups were the only ones who chose the response *I didn't know what else to do*. This suggests that some of the younger students may have been simply doing what was expected of them, at their age, by enrolling in HE, with no specific end goal, other than completing an undergraduate degree. This also highlights that, as the rates of participation among 18 to 20-year olds in HE has increased over time, it may have become almost 'deviant' for those with the suitable qualifications not to go to university after they finish school. Conversely this also explains how mature students might feel that they are deviant for engaging in HE well after leaving school, as highlighted by Gorard (2002). This links to White's (2007, p. 90) discussion of 'default choices' as students choosing this option do not appear to be fully engaged in their decision. I suspected that these students may be less motivated and might perform worse, as suggested in Reardon and Bertoch's (2010) research. This might mean that they were more likely to drop out because they did not appear to be highly motivated by specific goals or by a love for their chosen subject. Unfortunately, as no one in the interview and diary phase chose this option, it was not possible to examine this idea. However, I found that taking the natural next step was certainly part of the traditional-age students' motivations in the interview and diary phase. Anna (17-20) highlights here that taking the natural next step was also part of her motivation for coming to university, although she selected *To increase my earning potential* as her initial motivation in the survey:

**Charlie: So you were ready for (university) then?**

I re-sat lower 6<sup>th</sup> so I spent three years in sixth form, so I was ready to go by then. It is a very small town where I come from, so I wanted to get out there and meet some new people. I did think I would feel more homesick but I don't. I speak to my parents every day."(Anna, 17-20, winter, First Year).

For Anna, there were a number of motivations for her coming to university, which could not be fully expressed in the survey, because she could only select one answer. It was evident from the way in which she spoke about coming to university, in interview, that this was an expected part of her life-course. Whilst Bethany made some similar comments about coming to university, she seems to have delayed taking this next step, partly because of her caring responsibilities for her mother:

Originally, I applied to [Case Study University] because it was one of the local universities. I think, even if I'd lived further away, I would have applied here anyway, because it's a good university. And [Mum's] always said like, "Oh you should go and live there", and I'm like, "No I don't want to leave you".

**Charlie: And she left you (laughs).**

She sold the house and I was like, you just need to go, you're going to have to go eventually, you just need to go now. Because it's best to do it now at the same time that I move to university, so that none of us feel like we are left in the lurch. So, it all worked out timing-wise quite well actually (Bethany 17-20, winter, First Year).

Her mother's move away, nearer her family, seemed to be important in Bethany not only taking this next step, but also in embracing it. Anna's and Bethany's discussion of university as moving into this next stage of life, echoes Finn's (2017) case study and Schuller & Watson's (2009) life stages, as moving away from the family home to go to university represented entry into adulthood and independence.

In line with Schuller and Watson's age bands, this also appeared to be the case for many of the young mature students (21-24) as just under 30% of the group also selected the *natural next step* option in the first survey. Though their difference to the traditional-age group was evident in a other ways, for example only one person in this group (representing 2.3%) selected *I didn't know what else to do*, which suggests that this group were generally more instrumental in their reasons for engaging in HE. One of the interview and diary participants, Joanna (21-24), who was only just in the mature student age group, selected *It was the natural next step* in the First-Year survey. When she thought back to how she felt when she was in her first lecture (she joined the research at the start of the Second Year), her comments reflected this:

'Wow, I finally made it: I am at university'. When I got there, I was like 'Wow all that hard work I put in was worth it' (Joanna, 21-24, winter, Second Year).

This explains to some degree why this response was common in the 21-24 age group, perhaps for the same reasons as those in the traditional-age group, because they were too not far away from them in age. It is also important to note that Joanna's motivations, like Anna, were also a combination of factors, so whilst she was able to express her main motive, the design of the question did not capture her range of motivations either. Joanna had delayed her entry into HE and, whilst going to university was always her plan, having a child at 17 had interrupted her education. She described how finding the right level 3 qualification helped her "get back on track" (Joanna, 21-24, Winter, 2016) with her education, which reflects Gorard's (2002) comments about mature students perceiving themselves as deviants in HE. Her attitude to being at university was as if it was her expected journey. However, her motivation was multi-faceted:

whilst it was always her intention to go to university, having a child meant that she wanted to go to university to set an example to him (Kearns, 2014; Osborne, et al., 2004) and to lift them out of a reliance on benefits (Callender, et al., 2014). But she also appeared to be determined to make the most of her time now she was at university to prove to her family and friends that she could do it (McVitty & Morris, 2012).

Some of the *other reasons* given by traditional-age students to the motivation question illustrate the pressure that some students feel to enrol in HE from their parents. For example, 'My parents made me' (Male, 17-20, Neuroscience), 'Couldn't argue with Mum' (Female, 17-20, Law), and 'I felt obliged to do so' (Female, 17-20, Criminology). There was also a comment from a young mature who saw this as a positive pressure, writing: 'To be able to give back to my parents' (21-24). Interestingly, most of these comments came from students who attended fee paying schools before university, which might suggest that they were under more pressure from their parents because of the financial commitment they had already made to their children's education. Anna (17-20), who also went to a fee-paying sixth-form, provided some insight into the pressures of family expectations in her First-Year interviews. She mentioned in her first interview, when asked about whether her parents were able to help her, that both her parents knew what it was like being at university as they both had degrees. She also said in this interview that her mother had 'banned' her from working during exam periods, so that it did not have a negative effect on her studies. In the spring interview, towards the end of the Second Year, she reported that her mother was cajoling her to organise voluntary work over the summer, to add more to her CV. Leila (17-20) also gained emotional support and guidance on her studies from her older sister, who had recently completed her degree. Whilst there did not be any direct pressure on her to complete her degree, from her family, the fact that her sister had successfully gained her degree, perhaps placed an indirect pressure on Leila to also gain a degree.

Although none of the other traditional-aged students in the interview and diary phase had family members with degree qualifications, family expectations were also evident as motivators, though they were less involved in their studies and career development. Both Emma and Bethany (17-20), discussed how their families felt incredibly proud of them for going to university, because they were the first generation to go. This created some pressure for them to achieve, as they did not let their family down, but there did not appear to be any expectations from their parents which directly influenced their motives. This perhaps explains why only a few (n=20/ 2.7%) of the traditional-age students selected the *I want to make my family proud* option in the First-Year survey.

For the mature students, family motivation was different, as previously outlined in research such as Callendar et al. (2014). Like Joanna (21-24), Simon (30+), who also had young children, cited his family as his main motivation, selecting *I want to make my family proud* to the motivation question in the survey. He explained in his first interview why this was the case, saying:

Finding out that as a mature student, coming here, I could have that chance again to build a better life for my children, ... I couldn't say no. (Simon 30+, interview, winter, Second Year)

Simon and Joanna's motivations resonate with the findings in Callender et al.'s research (2014) where students were motivated to give their children a better life and be a positive role model. This suggests that for student parents, their children are often at the root of employment motivations. As shown in Table 8.1 proportionately, mature students were more likely to select *make my family proud* (6.8%/n=20 21-24 age group, 8.3%/n=1 24-29 age group, 6.25%/n=1 30+ age group) than traditional-age students (2.7%/n=20). These groups might be more likely to have dependent children than those in the 17-20 (see Appendix 10, Table 6), which might explain this finding. This is because, in contrast to Joanna and Simon, students in the interview and diary phase who were aged over 30 and had adolescent or grown-up children, cited personal reasons, rather than family reasons, as their motivation.

I was surprised to find that some factors did not appear to influence students' motivation, such as their caring responsibilities, and gender stereotypes. I believed that caring responsibilities would influence mature students' motives. However, people with caring responsibilities were split across all of the age groups, including traditional-aged students. I suspected that family might be a motivation for students with caring responsibilities, but this did not prove to be the case (see Appendix 10, Table 5) even for those who had caring responsibilities for children, as demonstrated in the interview and diary phase. I expected that women might be more inclined to select *to make my family proud* as the answer to the motivation question. This was because many of the people with caring responsibilities were female, and because previous research illustrated that mothers engaged in education to set an example to their children (Callender, et al., 2014; Bamber & Tett, 2000). In fact, men were more likely than females to select *to make my family proud* as their most important motivation (see Appendix 10, Table 6) as only 2.3% of women chose this option, who were all in the 17-20 age group. Women in the 17-20 and 25-29 group were slightly more likely to be motivated because *it was the natural next step* and less likely to select *I don't know what else to do* than men. There were also slightly higher numbers of women influenced by particular jobs in the 17-20 age group and much higher numbers in the 21-24 age group, which suggests that younger women were more motivated by employment than younger men in this group.

### 8.3: Intellectual Motivations

Intellectual motivations certainly seemed to be more prominent motives in the mature age groups, but particularly for the students aged over 25. For many of the mature students, it was more apparent that their focus was achievement, rather than fulfilment. In this section I consider these different motivations, but also how these intersected with some of the instrumental motivations discussed in the last section.

#### 8.3.1: Fulfilment

In line with Wolfgang & Dowling's (1981) findings in relation to cognitive interest, mature students seemed to gain more motivation from this than traditional-age students. To identify students who were motivated by intellectual fulfilment, I looked at the students who selected the response *I wanted a challenge* and I also explored this topic in interviews and diary entries. In the survey, as shown in Table 8.1, more mature students selected the *challenge* answer than traditional-age students, and the percentages increase as the group age increases. In the 17-20 group, only 4.7% chose this option, 9.1% of 21-24-year olds, 16.7% of 25-29 and 25% of students in the 30+ group. Numbers of students in the older age groups are small, so this may not reflect mature students in general, but interview and diary data illustrated why this might be a good representation of older mature students in general. It was also apparent that some of the traditional-aged and younger mature students were also motivated by challenge, though they were less likely to select this option than the older student groups (see Table 8.1). The other comments from students in these groups showed some parallels with the comments from mature students. There were fourteen 17-20-year olds who wrote that they were motivated by a love or desire for learning and two who wrote 'fun/experience' and 'to experience life outside of home and mature', which was not mentioned at all by the mature students. This suggests that some traditional-aged students are motivated by the fulfilment of the experience of being at university, rather than by intellectual fulfilment, which was a more common theme for mature students.

As previously mentioned, considerably more students in the 30+ group selected *other reason* than any other age group (37.5%) and some of the motives discussed here related to intellectual fulfilment, for example: 'realising a life-long ambition', 'fulfilment', 'love of science' and 'I want something better for myself'. These all relate to students' personal goals, rather than a specific outcome, unlike the students who had instrumental motives, which were discussed in the last section. This was also evident in the personal accounts of all of the students aged over 30 in the interviews and diary entries. They all claimed they were taking the opportunity to do this now



because they felt they were in the right position in their life to negotiate it. Andrew (30+), who chose *other reason* and wrote ‘fulfilment’ as his initial motivation in the survey, explained in his first interview how because he had his neurological disorder diagnosed recently, he felt he could now take this opportunity to gain fulfilment through education and get a better life:

“The fact that I want to be here. The fact that I want to succeed. Grim determination. I only got diagnosed two years ago so I’ve gone through life giving up on a lot of things. Even when you do you don’t know how to succeed at things, ‘cos I didn’t know how my brain worked what the problem was. ...my condition gives me a hyper focus, blinkers, so you just deal with one thing then the next and time passes, you soldier on.” (Andrew, 30+, winter, First Year).

The connection between timing and fulfilment was also particularly evident for some of the other participants in the interview and diary phase, which reflects Schuller & Watson’s (2009) view of different life stages well. Rebecca (30+), for example, also chose *other reason* in the survey, stating ‘I wanted something better for myself’. She explained in her first interview that she had always intended to go to university, but because of her husband’s job and having four young children she had to delay her education to prioritise them. Now that her children were almost all grown up she felt that this was the right time for her to pursue her dreams. As will be discussed in the next section, this determination to try to gain the fulfilment she desired helped her to, even though she had to drop out from a degree for a second time. As shown in this diary entry, when she enrolled for an undergraduate degree for a third time, she felt she had finally found a subject that she loved and felt she was good at:

**Is there anything else you want to add?** I have finally found the right thing for me, it’s taken much longer than I thought, sometimes I feel a little sad as this is what would be my third year for my original choice of degree, I would be a little further down the line but things happen for a reason I guess, I have finally found the right thing for me which is the important thing I guess (Rebecca 30+, diary entry, November, Second Year of research)

Fulfilment was something that also motivated many of the mature students who did not have children in the interview and diary sample. Adam (25-29), explained in his first interview how actually being at university was fulfilling a dream, though achievement was slightly more important for him, because of his previous experiences in employment and education. Therefore, this will be discussed in more detail in the next section, but it is important to note that there was some cross-over between these categories.

### 8.3.2: Achievement

For those who had attempted university before, completing their studies this time was really important. Amy (21-24), Rebecca (30+) and Sally (30+) all fell into this category, as they had all previously enrolled in HE and had to drop out, for a range of reasons. Amy (21-24) explains here, how her engagement with further and higher education varied to traditional routes:

“I left school at 16 and worked for a year or two at a doctor’s surgery and I got a dispensing qualification through that. Then I decided to go back to college to do my A-levels because I wanted to progress and do more, I wanted to go into medicine... didn’t get in to medicine after I finished my A-levels, but I did get in to Newcastle. I didn’t enjoy it so I came back and went back to [high street pharmacy]. I did that for a year or two and then realised I need more, I wasn’t satisfied with what I am doing. I knew I was cleverer than what I was doing” (Amy 21-24, interview, winter, First Year)

The determination for these women to succeed in their pursuit of an undergraduate degree was a powerful motivation for them. They appeared to be completely unperturbed by their previous experiences of dropping out and even more determined to succeed. Although Rebecca (30+) dropped out a second time at the end of her First Year at the case study university, she appeared even more motivated to succeed when she started a degree at another university the following year. Sally (30+), who also dropped out a second time at the end of her First Year, during this research, also remains determined that she will resume her degree at the case study university, when the time is right:

I reluctantly had to leave uni as me and the kids’ dad split up ... It has obviously had a massive impact on them, so I need to concentrate my efforts on helping them through it and establishing stability before thinking about returning (Sally 30+, email, summer, Second Year)

Adam (25-29) had a similar resilience and passion to achieve an undergraduate degree. His experiences at school may have played a part in his decision not to participate at a traditional age, both at home and school. He also suggests that he was not ready to engage in education at a traditional age:

**Charlie: Did you have any formal qualifications?**

No, basically when I was in school I was a different person. I was sort of Dennis the Menace, lived in the moment, didn’t care about anything else. And so, I think I had two Cs, one in art and one in maths and that was it. And then obviously I worked. (Adam 25-29, interview, winter, First Year).

Adam also sounded like he was genuinely surprised when he realised that he was actually capable of achieving in education, when he spoke about his experiences of engaging with education again:

I went back to school, that was hard because I didn’t get any support in that, including family and stuff... they didn’t think I’d do it. Well, when I say do it, like achieve any different grades. Because they never really saw me like that, my mum did, I guess. But my father didn’t, and he tried to talk me out of it... And I had to basically prove him wrong. And so... I thought, well maybe I’ll test the water and go back to doing English... I got one of those ICS, I’ve forgotten what they call it now, but basically you learn, home learning... I had to send material in and then at the end had an exam. And then in January did an English Language GCSE test, and to my surprise I got an A star.

**Charlie: Wow.**

Yeah, that was like, shit [laughs]!

**Charlie: That's amazing.**

And then once I showed my dad that, then he had my back. I think he realised that I was probably a bit smarter than he thought I was" (Adam, 25-29, interview, winter, First Year).

It is apparent that having the time to dedicate to a degree was important for mature students, often alongside a desire to achieve an undergraduate degree, which often fulfilled an unanswered need to learn. For traditional-aged students the pursuit of a degree seemed to be less about intellectual fulfilment and more about an instrumental need to secure themselves a good career. Therefore, there were notable differences, according to students' ages, in respect of students' initial motivations.

## 8.4: Motivations During Study

To see what kept students motivated during their studies they were asked about motives again using a different set of questions in the Second-Year survey. These questions were designed upon the motivational themes that developed in interviews and diary entries, as it became evident that some of the students' motives changed as they progressed through their First Year.

Table 8.3: Age and Students' motivation for studying (Second-Year survey)

	17-20		21-24		25-29		30+	
<b>The fear of failing</b>	212	35.6%	23	32.4%	4	17.4%	1	12.5%
<b>My end goal</b>	154	25.9%	21	29.6%	11	47.8%	1	12.5%
<b>Determination</b>	102	17.1%	12	16.9%	2	8.7%	4	50%
<b>Enjoyment of the subject</b>	68	11.4%	7	9.9%	3	13%	1	12.5%
<b>I wasn't motivated</b>	43	7.2%	3	4.2%	2	8.7%		
<b>Other reasons</b>	3	0.5%						
<b>Missing</b>	13	1.7%	5	4.2%	1	4.3%	1	12.5%

Responses to the motivation questions in the Second-Year survey are shown in Table 8.3, above. Nine people failed to provide their age, so these cases were removed from the analysis. Most students reported that they were motivated by the *fear of failing* (34.7%) and this response was much stronger for the 17-20 and 21-24 age group. The next most common response for students was *my end goal* (26.8%) and this response was the highest for students in the 25-29 age group. The third highest response was *determination* (17.3%), which was largely chosen by students in

the 30+ group (50%), so it was apparent that motivation during study was different for students according to their age.

#### 8.4.1: Career and Employment

The answers given in Table 8.3 are not specific to employment, however, I felt that the answer *My end goal* could be related to employment and career outcomes. However, because the most common response was *Fear of failure*, I suspect that this did not accurately reveal how employment influenced students' motivation. Career was mentioned by three students in *other reasons* in relation to getting a transfer to medicine, two of whom were from the 17-20 group and one who failed to detail their age. The interviews and diary entries proved much better at capturing students' motivations during their degree. As the students progressed, all but one appeared to have their eye on a future career. The only student in the interview sample (n=13) who did not mention their future career was John (30+), as he had been retired out of his former career and had paid off his mortgage, so he stated that his degree was purely for his personal fulfilment. Of the other students, some always had a career goal in mind such as Emma, who wanted to be an academic:

**Charlie: So, in terms of your reasons for coming here and what's keeping you going, is it the enjoyment, what is keeping you motivated through all of this? One single thing, is there an end goal?**

I'd quite like to get a PhD out of it, so there's that motivation of I need to do well because I won't be able to go on and do that (Emma 17-20, interview, winter, Second Year).

This also reflected the other comments from the survey that implied that gaining access to their chosen career (medicine) meant they had to get the best grades, mentioned earlier in this section. In contrast, Adam also talked about how his motivation changed during his studies, in the middle of his Second Year, moving from the initial focus of becoming a scientist, to motivation which comes from the routines of student life:

**Charlie: What is driving that motivation?**

I always struggle to answer this question (Laughs).

**Charlie: Well, in the early days it was that idea of, that dream of the lab coat, which was what you said in the beginning.**

Yeah, that's still the main driving force. But I don't consciously think of that anymore, as such, I don't know, you just kind of get used to the routine of just like, oh this essay has got to be done on so and so day, right, better get this done. That's probably as far as consciously thinking goes (Adam 25-29, interview, spring, First Year).

So, whilst Adam's instrumental motivation had not changed, his day-to-day motivation had become meeting the demands of his course, rather than his career. This finding has not been represented in the existing literature, so this extends our understanding of mature students'

ongoing motivation. John (30+) and Andrew (30+) developed a similar attitude, which will be discussed in the section on Milestones. Adam's extract above also demonstrates how well he had adapted to academic demands, as completing assignments had now become part of a routine, similar to the routines of employment in many ways. The negative views he previously held about himself as a learner, which were based on his experience at school (Bamber & Tett, 2000), dissipated as he progressed and he gained confidence in his academic abilities, as also found in Elliot & Brna's (2009) research. His focus on his career goal, however, remained steadfast.

Clothing was also mentioned as a motivator in terms of employment for Rebecca (30+) at the end of her first term on her new degree. In a similar way to Adam's initial motivation of wearing a Lab coat, Rebecca spoke of how wearing her paramedic uniform motivated her, when she was asked about the highlights of that term:

It was putting on my green uniform. Our head lecturer was like "It's like putting on your tights with your pants on top" and that is exactly how I feel. Not like I am going out and saving lives, just like 'Look what I am wearing!' It is almost like 'They are really going to let me do this!'...It is like 'I am actually doing this. (Rebecca 30+, interview, winter, Second Year of the research)

Also, for her the hands-on experience of her vocational degree, which lent itself to some of her existing experience, made her feel like she was more knowledgeable and fully capable of achieving her degree. This also seemed to run alongside the motivation of her uniform. This was in direct contrast to the way in which she felt when she was studying on her academic degree at the case-study university, where she lacked motivation and direction, and subsequently felt she was struggling academically.

Although Joanna's initial motives were the natural next step, it was very evident that employment was also an ongoing motivator for her. This was more because of her circumstances, than because of a specific career:

That is my motivation every day, I wake up and I am like 'Do I really have to go?' and he is like "Mummy" and I am like, this is the reason I have to go to university. 'Cos I need a life for him, we can't always live on benefits for the rest of our lives; that is no life to live. It is very difficult to live on benefits. I need a job to look after myself and my son (Joanna 21-24, interview, winter, Second Year).

I really want to get a job after I finish this course and get off benefits. My son is like "My mum went to university". That is like my drive, 'cos you see a lot of young people who have kids and they just give up. I don't want to be one of those people. I know I can do it, I'm not the smartest person, I will learn. I like nice things, nice clothes, nice car, so I'm going to work hard to get it (Joanna 21-24, spring, Second Year).

Simon (30+) also had a similar focus on his career, in order to make a better life for his family, and this is evident in his interview and throughout his diary entries. Like Adam, his career motivation remained his driving force but at the root of this was his family and transforming their opportunities in life, in a similar way to the students in Callendar et al.'s (2014) research. Circumstances were also a motivating factor for Andrew, both at the start of his degree and during his studies. This is apparent in his diary entries during the three years of his degree:

**What has kept you motivated to attend/study this week?** Grim determination, and wanting a better life (Andrew's Diary entry, November, First Year).

**What is motivating you to attend university at the moment?** Passion for the subject matter and the improved long-term career prospects (Andrew's Diary, February, First Year).

**What is motivating you at university at the moment?** Getting good grades and acquiring good skills and knowledge in order to improve myself as a person and hopefully get a good job (Andrew's Diary, September, Second-Year).

**What is motivating you to complete your degree at the moment?** Money, career, self-esteem etc. but also I am really falling in love with the subject matter now. (Andrew's Diary, December, Second-Year)

As students progressed through their degree, their motivation for career and employment goals seemed to magnify in diary entries and interviews, particularly towards their third year.

#### 8.4.2: Social Influences

As discussed in the last section, improving life for their family through their career and employment goals was an important motivator for some of the mature students, throughout their studies. It became apparent in the interviews and diary entries that, more than just being a motivating factor in students' desire to study, family were actually more important in helping students to stay motivated. As a result, a question was included in the second questionnaire, asking *Who helped you to stay motivated last year?* Students could select as many answers as they wished, with some selecting only one response and others selecting 4 responses.

Table 8.4: Who helped you to stay motivated? (Second-Year survey)

	17-20		21-24		25-29		30+	
<b>My family</b>	308	35%	35	29.9%	13	35.14%	3	37.5%
<b>My friends</b>	254	28.86%	33	28.2%	10	27.03	1	12.5%
<b>My lecturers</b>	89	10.11%	14	11.96%	2	5.4%	2	25%
<b>My partner</b>	110	12.5%	16	13.67%	5	13.51%	1	12.5%
<b>No one motivates me</b>	102	11.59%	10	8.55%	3	8.1%	1	12.5%
<b>Other</b>	17	1.93%	9	7.7%	4	10.8%		
<b>Total</b>	880	100%	117	100%	37	100%	8	100%

There were 20 (3%) missing responses to this question. Students' responses are shown in Table 8.4, above. It is evident that family were very important in supporting students as this was the most popular selection across all age groups. Friends were also an important motivator for all age groups and partners (which was referred to as partner/boyfriend/girlfriend in the survey) less so selected in the younger two age groups and lecturers were only mentioned by small numbers of students who tended be students in the youngest two age groups. *No one motivates me* was the least popular selection. *Partners* were also a reasonably popular source of support for students of all ages in the survey and the way in which partners helped to keep students motivated was evident in interviews and diaries, again across all age groups. Bethany and Emma (17-20) both had boyfriends who were also studying in HE at the same time, so they found that they were an excellent source of support throughout the two years. Rebecca and John (30+) also regularly cited the support of their partners as the means by which they re-motivated themselves (as discussed in more detail in 8.4.6 Motivation Difficulties).

Family provided motivation for all of the students in the interview and diary phase. As previously mentioned, those who had family members with experience of studying for a degree were supported both emotionally and academically. As shown earlier in the chapter, Anna's (17-20) mother was a significant force in motivating her to do her best at university, not only academically, but in respect of encouraging her towards activities that would support her career goals. This was also evident for Leila (17-20) as her sister understood the challenges of undergraduate study and provided moral and academic support for her, by putting her in touch with a friend who had subject specific knowledge. One of the mature students also benefitted from this, as John's son was also studying as an undergraduate, so he was also able to support him emotionally and provide him with practical advice. This highlights how possessing social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) can be of benefit to students, both in terms of motivation and

in terms of academic adaption. For the students whose family had no experience of HE, motivational support was still very evident. Parents, as previously discussed, acted as motivational cheer-leaders and were an important source of moral support. Although they were unable to provide them with academic advice when students shared their concerns with them, their emotional support was essential in keeping them focussed on their goals.

As shown in Table 8.4, friends were also an important motivator for students and this became more evident as students progressed through their degree. This implied that social adaptation was, again, more important than the mature students had appreciated during their first year. However, as younger students tended to be more motivated by the social side of university, initially, I believed that would follow them throughout their studies. This was not the case, as students from all age groups highlighted friends as an important motivator (see Table 8.4). The interview and diary data also support this. Though the mature students tended to have fewer friends at university than the traditional-age students, everyone had at least one person on their course who they found to be helpful both in staying motivated and in negotiating the demands of university life. The difference appeared to be that the mature student friendships tended to be confined to academic needs, often supported by a single friend from their course. Traditional-aged students, in contrast, tended to have a number of friends who supported them both academically and outside of university.

Table 8.5: Strongest feeling about coming back to university? (Second-Year survey)

Age Group	17-20		21-24		25-29		30+		Missing		Total
Looking forward to being with my friends	196	32.9%	11	15.5%							29.3%
Looking forward to learning	246	41.3%	38	53.5%	16	69.6%	4	50%	6	67.6%	43.9%
Worried about being on my own	19	3.2%	2	2.8%	1	4.3%	1	12.5%			3.3%
Worried about my studies	115	19.3%	18	25.4%	5	21.7%	2	25%	2	22.2%	20.1%
other	16	2.7%	1	1.4%			1	12.5%	1	11.1%	2.7%
missing	3	0.5%	1	1.4%	1	4.3%					0.7%

The main difference between the age groups was how important friends were to the students. At the start of their Second Year, students were also asked how they felt about coming back to university, and the answers (see Table 8.5) confirm that friendships at university were more important to younger students. Only students from the 17-20 (32.9%) and 21-24 (15.5%) age



groups selected the answer *I was looking forward to being with my friends*. This contrast is also shown here in Bethany and Adam's comments about friends:

**Charlie: You were glad to come back. I just really want to know a little bit more about that, I suppose.**

Over Christmas, as soon as Christmas has gone, you're thinking home is great, but it's so hard, I just want to go back...Because the social side of it, it's just good to get back and see everybody..., I think everybody sort of says, oh you have a great social life when you get there, but you never really know what it's going to be like until you do get here. And in some ways, it's more than what you expect it to be. I think mainly because of the close friendships but in some ways it's not like you're going out every night and drinking, like everybody makes out you are... just going out at night as well, going out for food, things like that. Just generally living with people as well gives you the social aspect... it's important to feel like you're not on your own (Bethany 17-20, spring, First Year).

**Charlie: Are there certain people here that you've got sort of a special relationship with, that sort of go with being at university? Have you developed strong relationships with people?**

I developed one relationship with one girl on my course, we go to the library every day together, Monday to Friday, not weekends, because I can't do weekends because I have my son. So, we try to go every Monday to Friday, in-between lectures and seminars. So, she's been like my friend from since the First Year I go to the library with... we do everything together... That's my main supporter, literally. Without her, oh gosh, I don't know what I would do. You always have to have that one friend in need that you can rely on, and she relies on me as well. So, you both work together and help each other [Joanna 21-24, spring, Second Year].

**Who do you feel has supported you in your studies this term?** [Friends name], someone who I befriended this term, she has helped me out on a couple of reports that we had to do for [two modules]. She has also been good moral support as well (Adam 25-29, Diary entry, December, Second Year).

Therefore, friendships were important in helping to motivate all students and it was evident that a lack of friends in a subject peer group was a disadvantage, as evidenced by Rebecca, whose only friend on the course dropped out and Sally, who did not form any friendships at university. Younger students (17-20) seemed to be much more motivated by their friends and the social side of university life than mature students, however. This demonstrates that feeling a sense of social belonging (Goodenow, 1993) or having habitus (Bourdieu, 1984) is helpful in ensuring that students' motivation is buoyed up by their social networks, helping them to cope when they are feeling challenged. Whilst support from family members and friends outside university also seemed to motivate students, as they had no presence at university and did not have the subject knowledge, they did not seem to be so successful at motivating students, as also found in Mannay and Morgan's (2013) research.

## 8.4.3: Performance

Performance was cited by many students in the interviews and diary entries as a motivation for all students, regardless of age. Even in their first interview in the first semester, Anna (17-20) and Andrew (30+) discussed how getting a good mark in their first assignment motivated them in all aspects of their studies. However, although grades appeared to motivate all students, regardless of age, there was an age difference in how students approached their performance in their First Year. As previously discussed, it was apparent from a question asked in the second survey on performance that younger students (n=80) in the 17-20 and 21-24 age group did the minimum to pass the year, as grades did not count towards the final degree classification. Although not all of the traditional-aged students approached it this way, this attitude was evident in some of Emma's comments in interview:

**Charlie: How do you think last year went, if you were to summarise it in terms of your expectations, and in terms of how you feel about yourself and your performance?**

It went really well, but I just, I think I didn't try as hard as I could have, because I knew it didn't count. Like there was—I know that I could have got better grades but at the time it was like, I don't want to not get credit for doing all this work and then just pass. I got a 70 in one of them, and I was like, it's a first, and then it was just pass.

**Charlie: Were you were conscious of the fact it doesn't count, so some of them you thought, I know what I'm doing, I don't feel I need to prove anything?**

Yes, in the ones where I got the lower, like the 2:2s kind of thing. Yes, but I didn't try, so it's fine. I passed (Emma 17-20, winter, Second Year).

So, as Emma describes here, getting no reward for hard work in the long term, made her feel that she did not need to perform to the best of her ability in this year. By the second year this had changed because all the grades in this year counted towards the final degree classification. As shown in Table 8.3, the fear of failing became a strong motivator in the traditional-age and young mature student (21-24) group at the start of this year, which is likely to be because performance now mattered more. However, this was also discussed by mature students of all ages in the interview and diary research, so whilst failing was something students of all ages worried about, mature students appeared less worried about this because they had used their first year to hone their academic skills and performance.

In comparison, all of the mature students in this phase, and many of the traditional-aged students, felt that it was important to perform to the best of their ability in the First Year, so that they could make all their mistakes in this year, before grades mattered. This reflects the findings of Chapman (2017) who found that getting positive feedback helped with belonging and reduced imposter syndrome or self-doubt in mature students. It also tallies with Elliot & Brna's

(2009) research, where academic achievement was seen to have an important motivational effect on non-traditional students.

It was evident that performance motivated all students regardless of age, as this was discussed by all the students in the interview and diary phase.

#### 8.4.4: Fulfilment

Initially, only mature students reported being motivated by enjoyment, but it became very evident as the research progressed that this was something that changed for younger students. Anna (17-20) in particular showed a growing enjoyment for her subject throughout her studies, which seemed to become more of a motivating factor in her Second Year than her initial goal of improving her earning potential. At the start of their Second Year, all mature student age groups, except 40+, were more likely to select that they enjoyed everything on their course than traditional-aged students (see Appendix 10, Table 10). Though responses in the 21-24 and 25-29 age group were more varied as they were also slightly more likely to select *I am not enjoying it so far*, than other groups.

For the mature students whose initial motivation was fulfilment, like Andrew (30+) and Sally (30+), their enjoyment of their subject continued and grew as they progressed. As Andrew's diaries show in the careers section above, his enjoyment remained a motivation alongside future employment, but his enjoyment seemed to grow every time he completed a diary entry or attended a research interview. Practical application also seemed to feed into his enjoyment, as he was notably more in love with his subject after he had attended field trips. This was also apparent for Adam (25-29), who had practical skills embedded into his course content. John's participation in university trips during the holidays, and his participation in voluntary activities in his subject area outside of university, meant that he was able to work with well-known experts in his field, which kept him motivated to complete his degree: 'I learnt more in the two weeks [working] with [the expert] ... I learnt a hell of a lot... came back from that buzzing' (John 30+, Winter 2016).

#### 8.4.5: Milestones

As they progressed towards the end of their first year, meeting milestones in their degree became a feature in all the students' diary entries and interviews. Though for mature students, over 30, these milestones often seemed to drive them through at the end of the semester, rather than their motivations. For Andrew (30+) and John (30+), their determination was illustrated in reference to milestones of time: to get through the first semester, First Year, Second Year, and complete their degree. Whilst they both enjoyed their subjects, the pursuit of

their degree seemed to weigh heavily on them, so they sometimes viewed it as something to just get over and done with. I believe that this was largely due to the barriers they faced in HE and the difficulties they had in adapting. Although this seemed to be quite a negative way of looking at their degree, it seemed to work in keeping them focussed through challenging times. Although Rebecca (30+) struggled with her motivation in her degree in the case study university, she was much more motivated in the degree she later enrolled in, after dropping out. Despite being more motivated this time and enjoying her course more, she also appeared to develop this milestone motivation. To date, this also seems to be working alongside her other motivations, to help her complete her degree.

#### 8.4.6: Motivation Difficulties

As discussed in the previous section, the milestone motivation appeared to help mature students aged over 30 during challenging times on their degree but staying motivated was particularly difficult for some of the students in the interview and diary phase.

One of the traditional-aged students, Leila (17-20) took a year out at the end of the First Year. Although it is not clear whether this was the result of her lack of motivation, throughout her First-Year diaries it is very evident that she struggled to stay motivated, which affected her ability to adapt both academically and socially at university. For Rebecca (30+), a lack of motivation was also a major factor in her decision to drop out at the end of her First Year. Whilst barriers were part of her decision to drop out, choosing the wrong course seemed to be the main factor in her lack of motivation to attend university. Although she experienced many of the same barriers during her current degree, her commitment to her subject area seems to have ignited a motivation that was not present during her studies at the case study university. John (30+) also came close to dropping out, partly due to the social barriers he experienced and his frustration with the commute, but particularly because he found he was not interested in one of the subjects in his joint degree. In his interview at the start of the Second-Year, he explained that he was at the point of considering dropping out, until he was told that he could move from his joint degree to a single degree in the subject he enjoyed:

I think I'd already come to the conclusion that I wasn't going to stay, do you remember when we spoke last March? I'd been in to see [my personal tutor], had a long conversation with him and he basically mapped out my options for me about how we can do this. The upshot from that was, he's basically saying, "Look [John], it's March, by the end of May you will have technically finished for the year, give or take". He said "Can you basically suck it up for the next six weeks or so?" So, I stuck with it (John 30+, winter, Second Year).

It is also evident from John's comments here that his personal tutor was instrumental in helping him stay motivated for the next six weeks, to complete his First Year. His partner and his sons

were also often mentioned in helping him to stay motivated. In comparison, Rebecca had similar motivational support from her husband, but because she was not enjoying her course this seemed to continually counteract his attempts to motivate her.

## Summary of Findings

In term of initial motivations for study, it did appear that there were differences according to age. One of the main differences was that older mature students (30+) seemed to be more influenced by personal motivations, looking for fulfilment and achievement without necessarily having a specific outcome. Younger students (17-24), in comparison, tended to have more instrumental and outcome-based motivations. Another key difference was the multifaceted nature of motivation for many mature students engaging with HE. In contrast, younger students in general, seemed to be solely influenced either by expectations that they should enter HE, and continue in education, or be influenced by a specific employment outcome. Finally, individual circumstances appeared to be much more important in understanding motivations in the mature student group. Those who seemed to pursue education for personal factors alone, were able to focus on this single motivation, like the younger students, often because they already had the security of previous successes in employment and were possibly much more economically secure, than other students. Conversely, for mature students who had not yet felt they had been successful in employment, and particularly if they had experienced financial difficulties, engaging in HE seemed to multifaceted, including a combination of personal and instrumental factors.

In terms of ongoing motivations during study, age also seemed to affect how motivations changed. Mature students appeared to continue to be motivated by the same factors that prompted their initial motivations. Younger students, however, seemed to develop multiple motivations as they progressed through their degree, with students beginning to develop personal motivations. The growth of enjoyment motivations also seemed to grow for all students in the interview and diary phase, regardless of their age. Also, although friends seemed to be more important for younger students, the support of friends as motivators was something that every student in the interview sample benefitted from, regardless of how many friends they had.

# Chapter 9: Mature Student Barriers Results

## Introduction

It was evident in this research that barriers were a large problem for some students and this certainly seemed to affect more older mature students than younger mature, or traditional-aged, students. These barriers challenged a student's motivation, sometimes stalling them completely. However, for many students, the barriers they experienced during their study meant that negotiating their degree was much harder than for other students, eventually overriding their initial motivation to continue their degree.

As previously discussed, students were asked to select the thing that they worried about the most from a set of answers, in the First-Year survey. These answers were designed around both the literature on barriers and the findings from the pilot research. Table 8.1 illustrates the answers given to this question according to students' ages. Looking at the totals, it was apparent that in general, relatively small numbers of students were worried about *accessing support e.g. academic/personal* (2.2%) and *being able to attend lectures and seminars* (3.4%). I was also surprised that mature students over the age of 25 did not select *accessing support*, as the literature suggested (Moxley, et al., 2001; McGivney, 1996) that they might need more support than traditional-age students. However, this might suggest that at the start of their course they were confident that they would get the support they needed at the university. I expected traditional-age students to be more worried about attending, because at this point younger students should have experienced the social side of university, which may have made it difficult for them to attend early lectures. Clearly, this was not the case, as only 25 traditional-age group chose this option.

I also expected that mature students would be more worried about attending, particularly those with children who might have difficulties negotiating the school or nursery run and arriving to lectures on time. This was also not the case, as only two students from the 21-25 age group and one from the 30+ age group chose this option. As discussed in the Adaptation Chapter, *organising study time* and the *standard of work* were the most selected options across most of the age groups, suggesting that negotiating and adapting to academic demands was a big concern to most students, regardless of age, initially.

Table 9.1: What worries you most about university? (First-Year survey)

	17-20		21-24		25-29		30+		Total	
<b>Accessing support</b>	16	2.1%	2	4.5%					18	2.2%
<b>Being able to attend lectures and seminars</b>	25	3.3%	2	4.5%			1	6.25%	28	3.4%
<b>Fitting in at university</b>	90	12%	6	13.6%	1	8.3%	4	25%	101	12.3%
<b>I have no worries about university</b>	29	3.9%	2	4.5%	2	16.7%	1	6.25%	34	
<b>Managing my finances</b>	87	11.6%	7	15.9%	1	8.3%	3	18.75%	98	11.9%
<b>Organising my study time effectively</b>	195	26%	6	13.6%	4	33.3%	5	31.25%	210	25.6%
<b>The standard of work required</b>	280	37.4%	17	38.6%	3	25%	2	12.5%	302	36.8%
<b>Other</b>	22	2.9%	2	4.5%	1	8.3%			25	3.0%

Table 9.2: What worries you most about university? (Second-Year survey)

	17-20		21-24		25-29		30+		Missing		Total	
<b>Accessing Support</b>	5	0.8%	3	4.2%					1	11.1%	9	1.3%
<b>Being able to attend lectures and seminars</b>	31	5.2%	7	9.9%	2	8.7%			1	11.1%	41	5.8%
<b>Fitting in at university</b>	8	1.3%	2	2.8%	3	13.0%	1	12.5%			14	2.0%
<b>I have no worries about university</b>	25	4.2%	4	5.6%	2	8.7%					31	4.4%
<b>Managing my finances</b>	58	9.7%	8	11.3%	3	13.0%	1	12.5%			70	9.9%
<b>Organising my study time effectively</b>	21 2	35.6 %	22	31%	6	26.1%	1	12.5%	2	22.2%	243	34.4%
<b>The standard of work required</b>	23 1	38.8 %	21	29.6%	6	26.1%	4	50%	2	22.2%	264	37.4%
<b>Other</b>	14	2.4%	1	1.4%					2	22.2%	17	2.4%
<b>Missing</b>	11	1.8%	3	4.2%	1	4.3%	1	12.5%	1	11.1%	17	2.4%

This suggested that barriers might have an impact on students' abilities to meet their academic responsibilities, rather than on their ability to attend university. Whilst the *attending* answer did not capture the difficulties students experienced when juggling their studies with socialising, caring and work responsibilities, it became apparent in interviews that the *organising* question had actually captured these issues instead. This will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

In the Second-Year survey there was an increase (see Table 9.1 and Table 9.2) in the proportion of students worrying about *organising their study time* (25.6%-34.4%) and selecting that they were *worried about attending* (3.4%-5.8%). However, both of these increases appear to be because the proportion selecting these responses from traditional-aged and younger mature students had increased. The proportion of 21-24-year-olds selecting the *attending* response doubled (4.5%-9.9%) and the traditional-aged group increased from 3.3%-5.2%. For the *organising* response there was an increase from 13.6% in the First Year to 31% for the 21-24 age group and the proportion of traditional-aged students selecting this also showed a rise from 26% to 35.6%. The proportion selecting *organising study time* in the older mature group, in contrast, had more than halved (31.25% to 12.5%) with more students in this group selecting the *standard of work* response in the Second Year. It was apparent in interviews that *organising study time* was an issue for some mature students though, as previously discussed, because of balancing the practical demands with restricted time. Some traditional-age students also highlighted in interviews and diaries that they struggled with *organising* their time Bethany (17-20) struggled to balance her employment with her academic commitments and Anna and Emma struggled to balance academic demands with social commitments. All of these issues will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

It also was apparent in the second survey that *accessing support* (see Table 9.2) had become even less of a concern (2.2%-1.3%) across the age groups, demonstrating that this was not a problem at this university, despite being an issue in the literature (Williams, et al., 2017; Moxley, et al., 2001). Another worry that had reduced (11.9%-9.9%) was managing finances, and this was also reflected in interviews and diaries, as students of all ages seemed to have learned to budget effectively by the beginning of the Second Year.

The research questions that concerned the barriers that students face in HE will be considered in this chapter: **Do mature students face different barriers to study and how might these differ?** and **Do barriers change over the course of their undergraduate degrees?** This chapter will start by considering the practical barriers that these students experienced in the first two



years of their degree, including caring and employment responsibilities. This is approached from the position that practical responsibilities, which in the last chapter were sometimes cited as motivators, could also present significant practical barriers for students. The second section will then discuss the contrasting personal barriers that mature students and traditional-age students experienced, in terms of their health and their social life to understand how these impacted on students' studies.

## 9.1: Practical Barriers

Practical barriers formed a large part of some of the mature students' discussion of their experiences at university, both in interviews and diaries. As will be discussed in this section, practical barriers seemed much less of a problem for traditional-age students, but those who needed to engage in paid employment were certainly affected by them. The basis of this section is the impact of caring and employment responsibilities.

### 9.1.1: Caring Responsibilities

For the small number of mature students who had caring responsibilities in this cohort (see Table 9.3) the biggest impact they appeared to have was on attendance. However, as will be discussed in this section, this was not reflected in the answers from carers in the survey research, but it was very evident in interviews and diary entries. Most of the mature students in this phase, who had caring responsibilities for pre-school children or children at school, spoke about the practical problems they experienced.

The data collected in the survey on caring responsibilities helps in understanding the context of caring experiences across the age groups. It is very evident that those who had caring responsibilities formed a fairly small group within the 2015/16 cohort at this university. Students with responsibility for caring for children were present in all age groups, although there were only single students in many of these age groups (see Table 9.3). The fact that there were four students with caring responsibilities for children in the 30+ age group, which represented almost half of the students in that group, suggests that parental responsibilities might be more likely in this age group. This also reflects the family responsibilities present in Schuller & Watson's (Schuller & Watson, 2009) 25-50 age group, which they suggested would limit decisions to participate in education. It is also notable that whilst caring responsibilities only affected a very small number of students in the traditional-age group (1.6%), most of these students were responsible for the care of older relatives or people with disabilities. As only one of the students in the interview and diary phase had experience of these caring responsibilities and this was past

experience, rather than current, it was difficult to gain an understanding of how this impacted on the experiences of young carers in this cohort whilst they were at university.

Table 9.3: Students with caring responsibilities by age (First-Year survey)

	A person with disabilities	Children	Older relatives	Other	Missing	N/A
17-20	3	1	5	3	9	728
21-24		2	1	1		40
25-29		1				11
30+		4	1	1		10

The impact of caring responsibilities is illustrated well by Simon, who initially started his studies living on his own, away from his wife and young children. He describes here how he found his studies easy to negotiate before his family came to join him:

**Charlie: Obviously, you must have sat in a lecture theatre before in a different university, but how did it feel when you came here? What was that feeling when you first sat down, there would have been hundreds of people because there is, on your course?**

Yes, and I was right up at the front with my pen ready to take as many notes as possible, because the first time at university, to me it was just that thing you do after high school, life is just supposed to work itself out, and now I have, as a mature student, I have a greater understanding of consequence and opportunities, so it was very much work that I was determined to get into. Also, not having my family nearby and not knowing many people, there wasn't too much to distract me at the time (Simon 30+, interview, winter, Second Year).

However, once he was living with his family again and he became responsible for caring for his children, these responsibilities had a detrimental impact on his attendance and his ability to complete assignments. This is illustrated in his comments in his diary throughout his Second Year, but this extract illustrates the kinds of challenges he faced:

**What has got in the way of your studies this term?**

Home life for sure! I'm still not sleeping well because of the girls' night-time routine. After months and months of being woken throughout the night by our youngest, we finally changed our routine so that if her crying got so bad that it would wake her sister up, we'd just bring her sister (the best sleeper in the world) in with us, so that our youngest could cry it out. It worked phenomenally and just after one week our youngest started sleeping through the night. Unfortunately, she now wakes up at 5:30 and usually won't go back down. So now I'm in parent mode from 5:30 till 9ish when I get them in to nursery, and again from 4 till 8. Doesn't leave much time for studies, sleep or social life. This is the real reason I missed an essay and did so rushed a job on the other. I just don't have time for much of anything right now (Simon, 30+, Diary, December, Second Year).

Illness also posed problems for Simon in the second semester during his Second-Year. His attendance was affected for almost a month after both his children contracted a childhood

disease, which he then also contracted. However, despite these challenges he managed to continue to negotiate his studies through the help of teaching staff and the course materials being available remotely, noted in his diary entry at the time:

My best source was the lecture recordings. I'm thankful to profs who take the recordings seriously and upload slides with proper chapters and bookmarking (Simon, 30+, diary, January, Second Year).

Sally's (30+) children's illnesses and the ill-health of her father, who helped her with caring for her children, also affected her attendance. In her first interview, when asked about how her responsibilities interact with her studies, she discussed the impact of her children being ill on her studies:

They can do, say for instance when the kids aren't well or, my eldest has various challenges with his autism, so I can sometimes think, when, like he is having a particularly tough time at the moment at his new secondary school. He is at a special school. So there are times where perhaps I am sitting and dealing with something with my son and in the back of my mind I am thinking I have got to read that text for tomorrow. So by that token sometimes I feel that I am stealing some of their time. But you inevitably feel that anyway no matter what you do, you could be having a bath and feel exactly the same thing, it is motherhood. You are damned if you do or damned if you don't. I might as well use the time for something that is going to benefit us all in the long run (Sally 30+, Interview, winter, First Year).

So, for Sally, it was not only the practical side of parenting that made studying difficult, but also the emotional effects of taking time away from parenting to study. This reflects Mannay and Morgan's (2013) case study findings, which highlighted that female students felt torn, because they felt they were rejecting their role as mothers. However, in Sally's case she seems to have consolidated this feeling by focusing on her motivations, which were the long-term benefits for her children and herself. Her experience also links to Gonzalez-Arnal & Kilkey's (2009) and Eliot and Brna's (2009) research, which highlighted the importance of having support networks close by, as Sally was able to benefit from having her parents living close to her and providing support with childcare. When her father became ill, her ability to continue to travel to the case-study university became impossible, because it was too far for her to be able to negotiate her children's needs. Had she chosen a local university, rather than choosing based on reputation, she might have been able to continue her studies alongside her the practicalities of caring. In a similar way Simon felt that his caring responsibilities sometimes affected his grades due to an unprecedented amount of illnesses, experienced by both his children and himself. This may have been partly because his children were so young, but also because neither he nor his wife had extended family in the close geographical area to support them with their children.

Sally also highlighted the importance of organising her time effectively, because of her caring role, perhaps illustrating the decrease in older mature students selecting this option in the second survey. As previously highlighted in the Adaptation Chapter, the organisation skills she had developed in employment were an asset to her in helping her to organise her study time around her caring responsibilities. Being organised was also something mentioned by the only mature student parent who did not feel that her caring responsibilities for her child affected her ability to concentrate on her studies. Joanna, who was a single parent, discusses her plan for her son's school holidays, seeming to balance both his needs and the demands of her studies:

**Charlie: So, when he finishes for school holidays, do you stop studying?**

No, basically he has two weeks off, I've already got plans for what we're going to do. He's going to spend a week in London with his dad, so I'll have him for one week and then his dad will take over, so that week I can go back to my studying, and that one week it's just me and him going park, and my friends have kids, so we're all going to meet up and just do something fun (Joanna, 21-25, Interview, Spring, Second Year).

So Joanna did not experience the difficulties highlighted by Hinton-Smith's lone parent research as she appeared to benefit whilst her son's father was caring for him. Whilst caring responsibilities were limiting for these students, particularly in terms of their time to fit everything in, they appeared to be able to overcome these challenges with the help of others and by organising their time effectively. So although Gonzalez-Arnal & Kilkey (2009) and Bowl's (2001) observations on the limitations of time for mature student parents were evident here, their ability to seek out support and organise their time effectively meant that they were often able to overcome this.

Consequently, caring for children alongside study could certainly be seen to challenge these mature students, but their ability to organise their responsibilities certainly seemed to help to overcome the practical issues of day-to-day care. However, when unexpected issues arose, such as illness, the proximity of the university and external support networks became crucial factors in students' ability to cope. The way in which the institution supported these students through the provision of online learning materials also really helped students who were affected by childcare issues.

### 9.1.2: Employment

In a similar way to caring responsibilities, many of the students, regardless of their age, had to juggle paid employment alongside the demands of their studies. As with caring, employment affected the mature students' experiences to differing degrees. The number of hours students needed to work seemed to be of importance, as highlighted in previous research (Callender, 2008; Dennis, et al., 2018). Whilst this certainly affected the time they had for their studies, whether this had a detrimental impact on their grades is debateable.

In the First-Year survey, it was evident that the older mature student group was slightly more worried about managing their finances (18.75%) (see Table 9.1) than the younger age groups (17-20 11.6%/ 21-24 15.9%/ 25-29 8.3%) and the proportion selecting this option reduced across all age groups by the Second-Year survey (except for the 25-29 age group which increased to 13%). This suggests that financial concerns had lessened for most students, perhaps because those who needed to engage in employment had found the balance in terms of managing their finances during term-time.

To understand these patterns in more detail, the interview and diary data gives us some explanation of how employment impacted on students' experiences during their undergraduate studies. Some of the younger students, Emma, Anna, Bethany (17-20) and Jack (25-29), only engaged in full-time work during the holidays which did not seem to impact negatively on their studies at all. The money that they earned during this time helped to top up their income to make it easier for them to cope financially during term-time. Only one of these students, Anna, ever reported any impact on their studies, as during the exam period she had to renew the qualification she needed in order to do her holiday job:

**Has anything else happened that you want to detail?**

As part of my job [ ], back at home, we have to renew our qualification every two years. Unfortunately, my [ ] exam has been scheduled right in the middle of my university exams and I will have to travel 3 1/2 hours to get back home. I hope that this distraction does not affect my exam performance. I also need to renew my qualification because I have got a summer job in France as [ ] and I won't be able to go if the qualification is not renewed (Anna, 17-20, diary, April, First Year).

Bethany (17-20) and Jack (25-29) also received financial support in their first year, which made it much easier for them to cope financially without term-time employment. Bethany had a small bursary that covered some of the costs of living in halls and Jack (25-29) had a larger bursary that completely covered the cost of his First-Year accommodation in halls. Both students maintained that this made it much easier for them to focus on their studies, as they would have needed to be employed during term-time, without the bursary. Although Bethany (17-20) had

managed to engage in part-time employment during her Access to HE course the year before, she felt that it would have a negative impact on her HE studies because of the demands of her timetable at university:

It [the Access course] was a lot of work, because it was the year course, but it wasn't so demanding. I could sort of fit it all in and I was only in for three days a week, so I'd work another two or three days and have at least one or two days off a week to sit and get some work done. Whereas over here I'm like Monday to Friday timetable and then Saturday, Sunday working. It would just have been too much I think (Bethany, 17-20, interview, winter, First Year).

In the Second Year Jack used his earnings during holidays to ensure that he did not have to work during term-time, so he could focus on his studies. In many ways the bursary could be seen to have given him a head-start financially, that helped him to manage the cost of living successfully alongside full-time study. As Bethany had to take a Resit without Residence year, in her second year, she was able to use this time to work full-time to build up her savings to support her financially when she returned to university to complete her Second Year.

For those mature students who had to work during term-time, this did have a negative impact on their time to study, as previously noted in the research by Manthei and Gilmore (2005). However, none of these students ever felt that it was having an impact on their grades, unlike in Callender's (2008) and Salamonson and Andrew's (2006) research, where longer hours had a negative impact. Although students who worked long hours often reported that they often felt tired because employment impinged on their study time. All the mature students who engaged in paid employment during term-time could not afford to stop working. Amy (21-24), for example, explains here how work impacted on her study time, even though she only worked one day a week:

I need to work in order to afford to be here, I don't like that really.....when I finish work I am tired. Then my study goes down a lot. It frustrates me because I have to work to do it.

**Charlie: How do you juggle?**

I leave my work completely free and then work on a Saturday, Saturday is my only day so that is how I have managed to juggle that. Even that little bit of money once a month helps.

**Charlie: Does this impact on your learning?**

On Saturday I probably won't do any uni work and then Sunday is like a relax day, I make sure that I have at least a day in the week where I watch TV, have a pyjama day. I think it is really important for your mental health (Amy, 21-24, interview, winter, First Year).

But although Amy needed to work and she coped by organising her time well, she also acknowledged here that studying would be her priority if she struggled because of her employment:

**Charlie: If you didn't have to work, would you be studying during that time?**

It is tough, I work really hard. But I am grateful for having a job. If my workload gets massive I may have to consider quitting my job (Amy, 21-24, interview, winter, First Year).

But in some respects, the experience in employment actually helped students to organise their time effectively so that they could juggle the competing demands, in the same way that Sally discussed having to be organised because of her childcare responsibilities. Amy explains here how she uses the same structure to tackle her studies, as she would do in employment:

**Charlie: How is this [studying] different from the demands of working?**

There is a lot to do at home on your own, a lot to juggle. You have to really work out your time, if you are with me. I don't have a lot of contact so I have got to really plan my days. I think it has helped me being at work because instead of going, I've got a lecture at ... I'm coming in for 9 and stay 'til 5, 'cos that is what I am used to, which is helping me on my course (Amy, 21-24, interview, winter, First Year).

So, it is evident here that working can actually help students in negotiating their studies in a more organised way. This was also acknowledged by Jack (25-29), who approached his studies in the same way he had to full-time employment. However, as he did not have the added pressure of term-time employment, this made it easier for him to cope when the demands of his degree required him to study for more hours than the 9-5 routine.

Although most of the traditional-age students and younger mature students in the interview and diary phase seemed to be able to cope without term-time paid employment, two of the older mature students felt it was not feasible for them to stop term-time employment, even though it seemed to be having a negative effect on their ability to negotiate their studies. Andrew had incurred debt before starting university, so he was still required to meet payments, despite being a student:

I work part-time, for financial reasons, I have three children but they are all grown up now. But I have got to pay child support for them too. At the minute I have worked the last few weekends, which is 8 hours a day, 16 hours a week. I've also got other debt from other sources: shortfall from when I sold my house.

**Charlie: So you have to work, how does that impact on your study?**

At the moment I am working in [my hometown] too. Plus, I'm too tired. I have the energy to do something physical, but I don't have the energy to concentrate to study. I try and just fill the gaps between lectures with some form of study or admin, like printing off the lecture notes/slides... I try and work 'til 7/8 o'clock in the evenings. Depends what time I get back, because there is a lot still to do (Andrew, 30+, interview, winter, First Year).

The tiredness that Andrew outlines here is similar to the tiredness that Amy (21-24) described previously. Though whilst Amy was able to manage her tiredness in her day off, Andrew did not have this capacity because he needed a larger income to meet his financial responsibilities.

Therefore, employment formed a significant part of his struggle to adapt to the requirements of university study. When he managed to get a job in the same town as the university, his hours increased substantially. At this point he acknowledged that it was having a negative impact on his studies, as he felt he was not managing to cope with the demands of his degree:

They prefer me to do 12-hour shifts [in the local hospital] and then there's a couple of weekends during term-time that I did two 12-hour shifts. And, you know, like yesterday I did 23,000 steps and doing that twice, doing that back to back and then... On some Mondays I only have one lecture, so I just skip that lecture and I spend the whole day doing my laundry, cleaning, logistical stuff because I wasn't... I didn't have the brain power. Or one of the days I had a like a three-hour computer lab on statistical analysis ... I was absolutely brain dead when I arrived there ... this is to process the results from an experiment we'd done for our coursework. So, that was a bit of a killer. So, I've gone down to one a week and I'm going to try and work... At the minute I'm planning to work for three shifts a week during the summer (Andrew, 30+, interview, summer, Second Year).

So, whilst becoming a student did not incur financial issues for Andrew, he was forced to couple study with employment because his status as a student gave him no respite from his financial commitments. He found that his situation was not one recognised by the university, so there was limited support available to help him, evident in his comments here:

I spoke to Welfare here because I got an allowance towards [a field trip] and they said don't tell the department you're working that many hours, because they said if you work over, I think 15 or 16 hours, if, for instance, you had to go to mitigating circumstances, they say well it's self-inflicted basically, it could influence their decision. I didn't even know that. I can see the logic (Andrew, 30+, interview, summer, Second Year).

But Andrew continued to cope with the demands of his degree, despite his concerns, although it left him feeling exhausted. The same cannot be said for Rebecca (30+), however, who struggled to cope with the demands of employment and her studies. It could be argued that as her motivation for her subject had waned, paid employment was just another contributing factor in her decision to drop out of the case study university, at the end of her First Year. This is evident in her comments in interview:

I personally haven't been able to put university first. Everything else still comes first and university comes last, which is completely (which I am now realising two semesters in) not going to work. Work still takes priority, I shouldn't be working, but I am working between 60 and 80 hours a month, which isn't a lot, but it actually is. Like when I leave here I will be going to work all night and then I will have a 9 o'clock lecture and it is like 'pew'. University is not my priority and it needed to be. I just thought it was something I could tag on and it clearly can't and I think it has taken this long to realise that (Rebecca, 30+, interview, spring, First Year).

Therefore, as Rebecca's commitment to university had deteriorated, it appeared that work had a more detrimental impact on her studies than it might have done if she had enjoyed her course



more. As she was still employed part-time when she started on a different course, at a different university, the following year, she seemed to manage to negotiate most of the demands of study when she enjoyed her course:

**Are you worrying about anything?** Money, time management, my mental health, the amount of tiredness due to driving, my journey now takes between an hour and ten minutes and an hour and a half each way four days a week. I am still trying to work also before placement starts as I can't afford not to. I am trying hard to go with the flow and take it as it comes as worry will only make it worse, this week was difficult and I didn't go in two days, yet when I do go in I feel much better, so it's strange that I stayed out but I was so tired and felt like I was falling behind (Rebecca 30+, diary, November, second year of research).

So, whilst working long hours alongside study certainly presented these students with difficulties, these difficulties alone did not appear to impact on performance, although they impacted on their attendance and their health. This also might suggest why there was an increase in students' concern about organising their study time between the two surveys (see Table 9.1 & 9.2), particularly in light of the increasing numbers of students having to engage in employment, whilst in HE (Callender, 2008; Times Educational Supplement, 2013).

## 9.2: Personal Barriers

The personal issues that affected the students in the interview and diary phase were restricted to health and learning difficulties. As discussed in the previous section, students did not appear to struggle with coping financially, though they did struggle with negotiating employment so that they did not face financial issues. This certainly seemed to be something that was more of a problem for mature students because of existing financial commitments and debt, but it was apparent that these issues were not due to engaging in HE studies, directly, as student loans seemed to meet most students' costs in the short-term. In terms of health barriers, it was evident that mental health issues were more of a problem for students at this university than physical health and this appeared to be the biggest barrier for mature students, which overlapped with other barriers students experienced whilst at university.

### 9.2.1: Mental Health

Mental health issues certainly seemed to have a relationship with the age of undergraduate students in this cohort. Older mature students were more likely to start university with pre-existing mental health issues and they also seemed more likely to experience mental health crises during the first two years of their undergraduate degree. However, there are two themes that became evident in this regard: firstly, many students fail to declare their mental health issues on enrolment and seek help when they initially experience crises; secondly, for those

students who did declare their mental health issues, the case study university seemed to provide appropriate help and support to manage their studies to overcome these barriers.

Table 9.4: Mental Health declarations by age group (Case Study Institution)

	2015/16		2011/12 - 2016/17	
<b>17-20</b>	51 of 3432	1.48%	382 of 19341	1.97%
<b>21-24</b>	7 of 370	1.89%	55 of 1930	2.84%
<b>25-29</b>	5 of 78	6.41%	31 of 493	6.28%
<b>30+</b>	5 of 98	5%	21 of 434	4.83%

Table 9.4 reveals that mature students over the age of 25 had a higher incidence of mental health declarations in this cohort. This was also apparent in the five-year figures, also presented in Table 9.4, but the percentage of declarations for those over 30 were smaller than for those aged 25-29 in the 2015/16 cohort. This suggests that students aged between 25-29 years are most likely to have pre-existing mental health conditions, although the percentages for both age groups over 25 are much higher than the percentages for the two younger age groups. This highlights that unlike the cohort in Macaskill's (2012) research, students aged over 25 in the case study cohort seemed more likely to have mental health issues, rather than those under the age of 25. However, as only one of the three 30+ students who had pre-existing mental health problems declared this, it follows that the actual instance of students with mental health conditions might be under-represented here. It is also likely that, as highlighted in the NUS Mental Distress Survey (2013), traditional-age students in this cohort were less likely to have been diagnosed with a mental health problem, before starting university. However, the fact that few students in this age group highlighted *accessing support* (see Table 9.1 & 9.2) as a worry in either survey (2.1% First Year/0.8% Second Year) suggests that they may not have encountered difficulties in accessing support when needed.

To see how mental health declarations compared to other health declarations I considered health declarations at the case study university, over a five-year period (see Table 9.5). Mental health conditions accounted for the second highest type of health declaration (2.2%) after specific learning difficulties. Rebecca dropped out, partly because of her mental health problems, John also came close to it during a mental health crisis.

Table 9.5: Health &amp; Disability Declarations at Case Study Institution 2011/12-2016/17

Declaration	No. of students	%
Blind or serious visual impairment	41	0.2
Deaf or serious hearing impairment	42	0.2
Information Refused	30	0.1
Long standing illness/ health condition	252	1.1
Mental health condition e.g. depression, schizophrenia	510	2.2
Other disability, impairment or medical condition	149	0.6
Physical impairment or mobility issues	67	0.3
Social/communication impairment e.g. Asperger's	126	0.5
Specific learning difficulty e.g. dyslexia, AD(H)D	1195	5.2
Two or more impairments/ disabling conditions	135	0.6
No disability	20335	87.9
Not Known	95	0.4
Missing	164	0.7

In the interview and diary phase three of the mature students aged over 30 experienced mental health problems during their studies and, as previously mentioned, whilst they all stated that they had experienced mental health issues in the past, only one of the three students declared this on enrolment. This concurs with Riddell and Weedon's (2014) research, which highlighted that students were less likely to disclose disabilities because of their perception of their disability indicating a spoiled identity (Goffman, 1990). Rebecca (30+) confirmed that she did not want her mental health issues to affect how she was perceived at university and whilst John (30+) implied that university would not be able to support him, he seemed to be keen to keep his mental health concealed at university. Amy (21-25) also mentioned in her first interview that she had suffered with depression and anxiety, which she cited as her motivation to return to HE at a university that was closer to her family. It was not clear if she had declared this, but as she had declared her physical health it was likely that she had. Unfortunately, as she left the research in the middle of her First Year it was not possible to understand how this affected her as she did not provide much detail on this. However, as she had made a physical health declaration on enrolment and made good use of the services provided by the university (discussed in the next section) it seems likely that she may also have declared her mental health issues and accessed support when needed.

Andrew had made a health declaration due to being diagnosed with a specific learning difficulty before he started studying in HE. As this also had an impact on his mental health, support was put in place to help him to negotiate difficulties. The combination of his condition and his responsibilities meant that his mental health was often cited as a difficulty in his diary entries, often impacting on his physical health, as shown here:

**Is there anything else you want to detail?** My mental health and my financial situation (which means that I need to work to support myself) continue to be a big detriment to my studies, my physical health and my mental health (Andrew 30+, diary, December, Second Year).

However, because Andrew had made a declaration on enrolment the support he was given by the university helped him to negotiate difficulties. Although he did not initially make use of this support, once he did, he found it made a considerable difference to his ability to cope with the academic demands. This demonstrates that unlike the institutional issues Moxley (2001) and the Equality Challenge unit (2014) observed, the case study university was very supportive when students experienced mental health issues and this support was appropriate. This is illustrated in his comments here:

Like, at the minute I'm going through the practical for tomorrow and highlighting all the key, like if you need to type something in, I highlight it. And [my support worker] will kind of do all that stuff with me and will make suggestions. She's really good with back and forth as well, she really listens to what I... She knows that not every technique will work with every student and because I'm older I suppose and because I've developed my own coping strategies and thought about it a lot, she is really good with listening to that, and she's good at giving you perspective on "don't look at who's in front of you, look at how far you've come. Don't look at every failure"... she's also good at the compromise thing where, you know, if I'm swamped and I'm exhausted, she'd say have an early night tonight, missing out the lecture notes won't make a difference in the long run, you'd probably get more out of that. So, she's really good. (Andrew 30+, interview, spring, Second Year).

This highlights the importance of providing suitable support for students to help them overcome the barriers caused by health issues (Williams, et al., 2017). As previously mentioned, John (30+) also experienced mental health issues during his first couple of years at university. This was brought on by the combined pressures of trying to adapt socially, cope with the commute and complete modules that he did not enjoy. Whilst he did not state that he had had previous mental health issues, per se, in his first interview, John did maintain that he would not be using the welfare team at the university if he needed help:

I'm going to sound quite, what might be the word...? Arrogant. My background is mental health counselling, I'm a retired senior nursing officer who spent his career helping people with mental health issues. I wouldn't go to any of them.

**Charlie: Okay, why?**

Because I'm reasonably au fait and self-aware. I'm fairly comfortable and confident with my boundaries. If I knew I was tipping out of those, I wouldn't need a welfare officer, I'd need a GP (John, 30+, interview, winter, First Year).

John did reach a crisis point, when he had set his sights on a first-class degree and was working night and day in order to maintain this. But he highlighted that it took his son to challenge him, to draw his attention to the issue, before he could recognise that he needed to do something about how he was feeling:

I needed both [my wife] and [my son] to say "What are you frigging playing at? This isn't you, you know, you've been down that rabbit hole before". You know, as I disclosed to you before, I've got a history of depression ... and she said "That's starting to, you need to go and see a doctor" and I said "No, whatever, talk to the hand". But when Alistair said you're not right, is it worth it? You know, and he basically said, "What is it you want to achieve? Why are you doing this?" ... "Because I can". And he's like, "Well, okay, but at what expense?" (John 30+, interview, winter, Second Year).

The pressure that Rebecca (30+) was also under caused her to suffer with depression, during her First Year, which she had also experienced in the past. Like John, she believed she could deal with this herself, because she had learnt how to cope with it before, but soon into her first semester she started to struggle with her mental health and also ended up in crisis. When she eventually sought support from the university and her GP, it seemed that she was too far behind in her studies to be able to cope with the academic demands, as shown in this extract from her interview:

Yesterday I couldn't get dressed. I stayed in bed, but today, I actually thought 'I have got to meet Charlie, got to meet Charlie, got to meet Charlie'. It kind of made me. Otherwise I would have sat in my pyjamas again. It is that sort of cycle.

**Charlie: So when you wake up in the morning you never know how you are going to be?**

No.

**Charlie: So you can't plan for anything when you feel like that, can you?**

No. I have started counselling, so that is just like tipping everything out all over the floor and trying to pick it up and trying to do all the normal things. And you know what, half of me is thinking I am getting better but, and this is the bit that most people don't have, I attempted to...last year, didn't like it...travelling was horrendous, so I dropped out and then I came to do this one... 'You can suspend your studies, it is not a problem'. Student finance on the other hand I'm not so sure, because even though I only had a term of finance, they still count it as a year of finance. So there is no guarantee, I can try, but they have to deal with it in a case by case. They need evidence documenting what has happened all the way through it and as much as I can get that, I'm tired of having to prove that I have mental health problems. [One of my departments] keep emailing me about 'You didn't turn up to that'. Well as far as I am concerned [the other department] is my department and I even went to see my tutor and she said 'It doesn't matter, tell them you are sick and your department is aware of it.' I

actually told her I am sick and I have mental health problems and they are still emailing me, they are not vicious, but it is a bit like, 'Are you not listening?' and that is kind of how I feel about student finance, they are not the most flexible anyway, so I think that if I walk away now, that's it, I'm done.

**Charlie: so part of the motivation for coming back was that it is your last chance?**

Yeah, I feel like I don't have a choice. Which I do have a choice, but I don't feel like I can walk away. I probably know better than these guys, there is always something else you can do round the corner, something you can change. But in particular I don't have the money to do anything else, so it is this or nothing and that actually makes me feel quite anxious, considering it was supposed to be about me, which starts the whole spiral and cycle again. So instead of making decisions, I'm just making no decisions, I'm just rolling with it! Which isn't going to work. I just logged into blackboard for the first time in about a month and there are two deadlines. So it is not going to go away, you can't just keep ignoring it like this, so I am really disappointed in me and in the experience, although it hasn't been what I thought it would be. (Rebecca, 30+, interview, spring, Second Year).

Consequently, it is apparent that the pursuit of a degree causes many students to struggle with their mental health, as all participants described that they had experienced a great deal of stress during their degree. However, this level of stress appears to be particularly difficult for students who have experienced mental health issues in the past. The difficulties Rebecca experienced in having to negotiate the support available to her at university, whilst she was in crisis, reflects both Goode (2007) Fuller et al. (2004) and Shevlin et al.'s (2004) research. Whilst John and Rebecca did not make timely use of the support available at the university, if they had made a declaration this might have made it easier for their departments to help them cope with their assessments and provide course materials when they were struggling, as demonstrated by Andrew.

### 9.3.2: Physical Health

To consider whether physical health problems affected mature students more than traditional-age students I looked at the declarations across the physical health conditions (see Table 9.6). The combined year's data suggests that, as for mental health, those aged over 25 also faced more difficulties with their physical health. The data for the cohort year are different to the pattern in the combined years, as the numbers are quite small for the older students.

Table 9.6: Health &amp; disability declarations by age group (Case Study Institution)

	2015/16		2011/12-2016/17	
<b>17-20</b>	78 of 3432	2.27%	512 of 19341	2.64%
<b>21-24</b>	17 of 370	4.59%	57 of 1930	2.95%
<b>25-29</b>	7 of 78	8.97%	20 of 493	4.00%
<b>30+</b>	3 of 98	1.66%	28 of 434	5.61%

As with mental health, in the interview and diary phase there were two mature students who experienced long-standing mobility problems. However only one of these students disclosed this. Again, although John (30+) had a long-standing mobility problem, he did not declare this, possibly because it was intermittent. However, in conjunction with his mental health this did make it more challenging for him to attend university when it flared up, because it caused him pain when travelling. But this did not present the same difficulties as he experienced with his mental health.

The student who did declare a long-standing physical impairment was Amy (21-24), who suffered from a degenerative condition in her back. She expressed that making this declaration helped her greatly, shown in her comments here:

The only issues I have actually had so far is my back, but the university have been really helpful. I've been able to get help from like the Accessibility centre and other places. They have done everything in their power to help me actually come back and get integrated into uni. So I've got my parking permit and everything (Amy, 21-24, interview, winter, First Year).

As Amy had started at another university and then experienced these problems after she left, it was important for her to get the right help from the start, as this condition would affect her throughout her time at university. As the case study university supported Amy well, in the same way that Andrew felt well supported following his declaration, this adds further support to the argument that provision of effective support can help students overcome health and mobility barriers (Equality Challenge Unit, 2014; Moxley, et al., 2001; Williams, et al., 2017) As Amy left the research it is difficult to know how this condition affected her going forward, but it is understood that she successfully completed her degree.

### 9.3: Social Barriers

Social barriers seemed to affect some students more than others but there did appear to be a difference in the social barriers that different-aged students faced. Some of the traditional-aged students' studies were affected by having to juggle their social life at university with the demands of their degree. In comparison, as previously discussed in the adaptation chapter, older

mature students were affected by their lack of a social life at university, which seemed to impact on their motivation and on their overall sense of belonging at this institution.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, more students selected the response, *organising my study time* as their main worry at the start of their Second Year (see Table 9.1 and 9.2) from 26%-to 35.6% for those aged 17-20 and from 13.6% to 31% for those aged 21-24. This may have been because, as their studies progressed, their social lives also became established. Although there was no evidence of this in the 21-24 age group in the interview and diary research, it was apparent for three of the four traditional-aged students during their First Year. Anna, for example, described university in her first interview as being like a 'massive sleep-over' every night. Although the social side of university was often cited as a highlight in their experiences on their undergraduate degree, all three students felt that they needed to limit their social life before their Second Year in order to concentrate their efforts on their degree. Their enjoyment of this, but also their concerns are apparent in their comments in interviews and diary entries here:

**Charlie: Highlights since you've been here?**

Definitely the social side of thing, so going out and socialising and making friends. It's not just all about like getting really drunk and everything, it is genuinely about having a really good time. And also, you're much more likely to go and say hi and make another friend, so that's probably definitely probably the main highlight (Bethany 17-20, interview, winter, First Year).

**Do you have any worries about studying/attending university?**

I think I'm worried that I won't be able to find the balance between too much and too little revision, and I think that even though I want to do as well as I can, the fact that a lot of my friends still have plans because the First Year logic is "we only have to pass" I'll end up socialising a lot more than I plan to because they don't feel the need to do as much revision (Emma, 17-20, diary, April, First Year).

**Has anything made studying/attendance difficult?**

I had a [sports event] over the weekend, which made it difficult to study, particularly as I have a report due in. I was also given a mini-presentation to prepare for, which I didn't have a lot of time to do. It was also my flatmate's birthday, which made it more difficult to study (Anna, 17-20, February, First Year).

Therefore, whilst the social side of university was embraced by all of these students, they seemed to acknowledge that it was a barrier to their studies, to some degree.

## Summary of Findings

The existence of practical barriers and personal barriers certainly seemed to be more prevalent in the older mature student groups, in this research. Whilst the younger mature students (21-



24) faced some barriers during their studies, they did not face the same quantity as those aged 30+, which seemed to make their studies much harder. Traditional-aged students, in comparison, did not seem to face many barriers at all. The main barriers that seem to have the biggest impact on students in this research are paid employment and mental health issues.

Students in the older mature group were much more likely to have caring responsibilities for children than any other age groups. These caring responsibilities, in themselves, did not necessarily impact badly on students' experiences, though having close support networks and access to learning materials outside of classes was essential in mediating any barriers that did occur (Mannay & Morgan, 2013). Although students' financial situations were certainly about many more factors than their age in this research, it seemed that mature students were more likely to need to engage in paid employment than traditional-age students. As a result, there was a negative impact on their available study time and this did not tend to change during their studies. Part of this can be explained by the fact that mature students tended to have more financial responsibilities so they had to work more hours (Callender, 2008) in order to meet these responsibilities as well as to meet their own basic needs. Traditional-age students, in contrast, found that student finance and holiday employment was enough to sustain them, so employment was desirable but not essential, especially if it meant their studies would be detrimentally affected. A positive effect of both of these responsibilities, that seemed to benefit the mature students affected, was that students had to be more organised, which they felt helped them to manage their academic responsibilities.

Mature students, in general, also appear to have a much higher incidence of mental health problems than traditional-age students, but this evidently is much more of an issue for mature students over the age of 25 in this research. The type of support available and the stigma that surrounds mental health seems to have deterred students from declaring their problems on enrolment. For those students who did declare their mental health or physical health issues the support at this university seemed to support them well to overcome barriers related to these declarations. Therefore, this research may only have revealed a fraction of the difficulties mature students face in this respect. Whilst these students struggled with their mental health at different points during their degree, the First Year seems to be the most difficult time, unlike in previous research (Macaskill, 2012) where problems persisted in students' Second Year.

# Chapter 10: Conclusion

These research findings provide a wealth of new information on students' experiences at university. The detail attained through use of a combination of methods has meant that it was possible to examine the similarities and differences within the mature student group, but I have also been able to make direct comparisons with the traditional-age student group. This has meant that findings can be in terms of the wider context of this student cohort, but also understood at an individual level.

This chapter will discuss some of the key findings that came out of the research questions, which formed the basis of this investigation:

- Do mature students adapt differently to university life and if so, why is this the case?
- Do mature students have different motivations for study and if so, why is this the case?
- Do mature students face different barriers to study and how might these differ?
- Do adaptation techniques, motivations and barriers, change in the first two-years of mature students' undergraduate studies?

Firstly, the questions that relate to adaptation will be considered followed by discussion of the key findings relating to the motivation and barriers questions. The chapter will end with a section that reflects on the research, including strengths, weaknesses and future research opportunities.

## 10.1: Adaptation

One of the most important findings for this research was acknowledging the importance of adaptation. This is particularly so, because previous research seems to have ignored the importance of adaptation, often only concentrating on the effects of barriers on students' experiences. Whilst I researched it as a separate entity to barriers and motivation, I found that the process of adaptation was often dependent on both elements. Consequently, it was difficult to deal with adaptation in isolation.

In terms of answering the adaptation research question, 'Do mature students adapt differently to university life?', their adaptation certainly appeared to be very different to the adaptation of traditional-age students in terms of the way in which they adapted, the levels of adaptation and the time it took for them to adapt. However, the classification of mature students is important here, as it was apparent that the mature student group was not homogenous and use of the mature student category ignored the discrete differences in experiences, because of the wide

range of ages included. The decision to break this category up was a good one as, by dividing students into more meaningful age groups, I was able to observe distinct differences in the attitudes and experiences of mature students of different ages, which revealed that young mature students aged 21-24 were actually a distinctive group. Much of this research found differences between the younger mature students and the older mature students, but there were also some notable similarities in terms of their adaptation. All of the mature students in the interview and diary phase felt different to traditional-age students, most notably in their First year. I was genuinely surprised that all of them felt this way, as I wrongly assumed that those aged 21-24 and possibly even those aged 25-29 would assimilate with the traditional-age students. But Amy's (21-24), Joanna's (21-24) and Adam's (25-29), comments in the adaptation findings chapter show that they did not want to socialise with them, and certainly did not see that they were similar. They also shared some of the other characteristics of mature students as their skills and experiences in employment helped them to be more organised in their studies and to take advantage of opportunities to improve their academic performance, even in the first year.

Although it is important for universities to understand that the younger mature group, which is the largest mature student group, appeared to be similar to traditional-age students in many other respects, as shown in their responses in the surveys. As a result, Schuller and Watson's (2009)'s up to 25 age band appears to be more effective than the traditional HESA definition of mature students being over the age of 21. However, this also ignores the evident differences in this group who also have some commonality with the mature group. Whilst their level of adaptation was different to traditional-age students, because they did not see the importance of social adaptation, the way in which they adapted academically and the time it took for them to adapt was very similar. As they appeared to be similar ages to traditional-age students it was also much easier for them to assimilate at university in teaching and learning environments, as they were not visibly different like the older mature students. This meant that they were less affected by the institutional barriers older mature students experienced. Consequently, they were both similar and different to the older mature student group and the traditional-age group.

As to the second research question, 'Whether adaptation techniques changed over time', for the older mature students it certainly did. As the design of university life at the case study university seemed to be designed around traditional-age students, they found it more difficult to adapt and it took them much longer to achieve adaptation. Unlike Piaget's (1936) contention that successful adaption involved environments adapting to organisms, as well as organisms adapting to the environment, adaptation at this university seemed to be a one-way process for

mature students. This explains why their adaptation was different, as this was also noted by Graham (2013) in her research, as she found that mature students would need to adapt to the norms of the university if they were to be accommodated. As a result, mature students' learning identities were much more negative (Bamber & Tett, 2000; Chapman, 2017; Gorard, 2002), because they felt a lack of fit within the institution for a prolonged period. Many struggled to integrate because they had to abandon their old selves (Reay, 2004; Rogers, 2003), as previously illustrated by Rebecca and John (30+). Whilst the traditional-age students, in general, found social adaptation to be an easy process, it seemed to be particularly difficult for the older mature students to assimilate into social networks. Age seemed to be the defining factor in this for the interview and diary phase participants, though there were other reasons that seemed to feed into this. Living at home and commuting made social adaptation more difficult which will also have fed into adaptation difficulties in the classroom or lecture environment, although Andrew (30+) demonstrated that living near campus and welcoming adaptation made it no easier to be accepted. As a result universities should consider providing a wider range of social and learning activities that might better include older mature students (Foster, 2009; McGivney, 1990), such as day-time events which do not involve consumption of alcohol. Field trips also proved to be a great way of helping Andrew (30+) to integrate into his peer group on his course. Consequently, this might also be a useful way of gainfully engaging mature students, and other minority students, whilst making good use of their time. As language, culture and interaction through learning are highlighted as important elements of successful academic adaptation (Dewey, 1938) the way in which students are taught also needs to be heeded by educators, so that classroom environments are more inclusive and sensitive to a diverse audience. Finally, whilst all mature students were dismissive of needing to adapt socially, it was evident that they all gained some sort of network at university to help support them academically, which makes these strategies even more important for universities to heed. Whilst they were adapted academically and performed reasonably well at university, it would be interesting to see if a deeper level of social adaptation would have changed experiences for these mature students.

In many ways mature student adaptation was much more complex than traditional-age and younger mature student adaption, as it seemed to be much more dependent on students' motivation and their negotiation of barriers. Motivation consistently acted as their push towards adaptation and barriers represented a consistent pull away from adaptation, though the influence of barriers seemed to lessen as time passed. This process links well to Gill's (1993) ideas of knowing as dancing, where the knower comes to know their new environment, or understand their new skill through the push and pull of experience and interactions. The

longitudinal element of this research was particularly useful in observing this process. For example, older mature students' adaptation was often challenged by barriers throughout the first two years of their degree, but they seemed to overcome these through their motivations for engaging with study, such as their career motives or being a role model to their children. The help of motivators, such as friends and family, was also crucial in this process, which actually seemed to propel students towards them reaching an adapted state. Using John's (30+) case as an example, his mental health, his previous 'high ranking' self (Rogers, 2003; Lehmann, 2014), and the strain of the commute, constantly seemed to pull him away from adapting to university. However, the interchange between his enjoyment of his subject, his family's support and his 'get to the end of this step' motivation appeared to edge him towards adaptation, even if only academically. But the barriers that mature students faced appeared to be more numerous, which often made it more difficult for them to stay motivated, to enable them to adapt.

It seemed that whilst social adaptation eventually took place in all age groups, there were distinct differences in the time it took students to adapt. These differences seemed to be linked to their age. The level of adaptation that students perceived was necessary was also very different. Interestingly the traditional-age and mature students aged 40+ seemed to put the most emphasis on fully adapting to the social side of university. Students' aged 21-39 did not seem to feel that social adaptation was necessary, although they all certainly adapted socially to some degree, even if it meant they only had a single friend at university. A new finding in this research, which does not appear to have been reported elsewhere, is that the mature students under the age of 40 actually chose to isolate themselves to help them focus on academic adaptation. Whilst social isolation is generally viewed negatively, this shows that isolation can also have benefits for students. Further longer-term research would be useful in this respect, though, as older mature students were clearly positively altered by their learning experience by the end of their second year (Dewey, 1938), but it would be useful to see how this adaptation helped them in their final year.

Whilst all students faced the same struggles to get to grips with academic requirements (e.g. readings, assessment) the mature students seemed to be more pre-occupied with struggling to meet the standard of work required. They were certainly more likely to blame their age for difficulties adapting academically and it was unclear as to why this would be the case. Socially constructed ideas about appropriate ages might be to blame here, making mature students feel that they are 'deviant' (Gorard, 2002) and consequently deficient academically. However, this might also be because mature students have had a gap in their educational experience. As a result of this gap, students might find getting into a study routine, seeking support or planning

for essays and exams much more complex than traditional-age students who will still be used to adapting to new educational requirements (e.g. GCSE to A level). Even those mature students who have recently completed entry qualifications, such as Access to HE, might struggle to adapt, because they still feel that their involvement in education is still relatively recent. It is also likely that as lecturers in universities have less contact with students, unlike lecturers in FE colleges, transition might cause more anxiety for mature students because they feel they need more support and direction. One recommendation, which might help universities and students overcome this difficulty, would be to pair First year mature students to Second Year, or Third year mature students, as mentors. This might help to reduce anxiety during transition and help them to adapt more confidently to academic demands.

Finally, a particular strength that was evident amongst all of the mature students, in contrast to the traditional-age students, was their ability to organise their studies around other aspects of their life, as previously mentioned in this section. These skills were evidently drawn from their experience in employment and from some students' experiences of caring for family. Whilst paid employment and childcare was often a barrier, it was also often a catalyst for making efficient use of their time, so that their studies did not suffer. This approach was also consistent for most of the mature students in the research over the two years of their degree, which seemed to help them to successfully cope with academic demands. Therefore, in this respect, mature students could be seen to adapt quicker to the organisational side of university life, than traditional-age students.

## 10.2: Motivation

The motivation findings in interviews and diary entries bear similarities to previous research with mature students (McVitty & Morris, 2012; Hinton-Smith, 2012), as they confirm the multi-faceted nature of mature students' motivations. In respect of the first motivation research question, 'Do mature students have different motivations for study and if so, why?', mature students evidently had quite different motivations across the age groups, and this was more often linked to their personal circumstances rather than their age. Whilst it could be argued that was a factor in respect of when mature students felt ready to negotiate HE, it is more likely that life course factors were more influential. Timing was certainly important for all the mature students, across all the age groups. For some, such as Adam (25-29), maturity seemed to be the most important factor in his realisation that he could achieve more in life. For others, such as Rebecca, Sally, Simon, Mia and John, their engagement with HE was all about it being the right time for them to engage in HE, as the motivation had always been there, it was just that more

important things in life got in the way of their education (Mannay & Morgan, 2013; Schuller & Watson, 2009). It is important that universities and policy-makers understand the heterogeneity of this group, as it proved to be an important theme throughout these findings.

In terms of the second motivation research question, whilst students' initial motivation did not seem to 'change over time' across any age group in the interview and diary phase, traditional-age and younger mature students (17-24) tended to have more instrumental and outcome-based motivations. Whilst these did not change, they tended to gain additional motivating factors during their studies, such as achievement and love of learning. Older mature students (30+) seemed to be more influenced by personal motivations, such as fulfilment and achievement, and this seemed to stay with them throughout their studies. However, traditional-age students did not appear to rely so much on their motivations to help them adapt to social and academic demands, as the routines of education (e.g. reading/completing assignments) seemed to help them cope with the demands of study. Mature students also seemed to develop this routine-driven attitude to study, but much later in the course of their degree, often when they felt they had adapted to university. These routines seemed to have the same effect as motivation in helping students cope with barriers, which I found surprising and I believe that this finding presents new information on mature students' motives, during their studies. Therefore, further research on the influence of routine in students' experiences would be useful, as it may be that mature students who struggle with their motivation might find that a routine-based approach might be of help to them.

The role of motives seemed to be particularly important for mature students in their first year (Tinto, 1993). Although Rebecca's (30+) decision to drop out was also influenced by the barriers she faced, I believe that her lack of motivation for her subject area, meant that she would never have been able to adapt. Whilst John (30+) and Andrew (30+) faced similar barriers, their love of their subject seemed to be their guiding light through these challenges. There is more evidence of this from Rebecca's own experiences, since she dropped out of the case study university, as finding the right course meant that she could cope better with these same barriers. Therefore, I believe that more should be done to help mature students make informed choices about their HE choices. FE colleges could provide more careers guidance and universities could do more mature student outreach, to help students to make the best choices for their future in HE.

### 10.3: Barriers

In respect of the first research question for the remaining theme in this research: 'Do mature students face different barriers to study and how might these differ?', barriers were notably different for mature students, particularly those aged 30+. This differed in terms of the quantity of barriers students faced and the complexity of these barriers. Traditional-age students, in general, only seemed to experience social life as a barrier, but many of the older mature students faced multiple demands on their time, which made undergraduate study more of a challenge. In terms of the second question on barriers, which considered if they changed over time, it was evident that they did not, but the mature students seemed to get better at dealing with these barriers, once the adaptation process had started to take effect.

Interestingly, in this research, fees were not seen as a problem for any of the students, as the funding available to pay for these loans meant that they had no impact on the students' day-to-day lives. In direct contrast, having enough money to live was a big problem, as indicated in previous research (Callender, 2008; Dennis, et al., 2018), but particularly for the mature students. Whilst traditional-age students were able to stop their employment if it began to impact on their studies, as in Bethany's case, some mature students could not stop or reduce their employment. Andrew (30+), Rebecca (30+) and Amy (21-24) needed their pay to meet their basic financial responsibilities.

This raises important concerns about supporting disadvantaged students, which has also been highlighted by Bradshaw (2018), chief executive of the Russell Group Universities. He urged the Government to consider living-wage maintenance grants of around £8,200 a year for students previously eligible for free school meals, but also to help improve part-time and mature numbers. As both Bethany (17-20) and Adam (24-29) benefitted from bursaries, because it helped them to avoid term-time employment, this is evidence of the fact that the provision of financial support reduces the barriers that non-traditional students face at university. Considering the barriers experienced by the other mature students in this research, I believe that such grants would also make a considerable difference to those students who already participate, not only those who might not participate because of the financial implications.

The other barrier that had a significant impact on mature students in this research was their mental health. These findings shed some light onto how mental health can affect mature students in HE, but they also indicate that mental health issues may be much more prevalent in the older mature student group. The institutional data showed that mental health declarations were higher in the older mature student groups. Though declaration of mental health issues is



a notable problem, as declarations only revealed part of the full picture of students who were struggling with their mental health in this university. Nevertheless, those students who made declarations, seemed to be supported well by this university, so this suggests that positive steps can be taken in supporting students in crisis, if more students can be encouraged to declare their pre-existing mental health issues. It is likely that traditional-age students and younger mature students are also under-reporting mental health issues, but it was not possible to see this in this research.

This underlines the importance of mental health awareness campaigns and positive messaging on campus, which could help to reduce the stigma that students still associate with mental illness. Further research on crisis points for both mature students and traditional-age students in HE is also needed, as this research only partially exposed students' experiences of crisis, because it only covered the first two years of their studies. Collecting anonymised data from mitigating circumstances forms might give institutions a more accurate idea of the mental health issues within their student population, as this seemed to be the point at which students felt they had to admit that they could not cope. Further research would certainly help in revealing the true extent of this problem, so that policy-makers and institutions can help to put appropriate support in place. This is important, as the two students who did not declare their mental health conditions said that this was because they felt that support provided was not appropriate, because they would need specialist medical support if they had difficulties. If this attitude is found to be widespread, universities would need to improve their links with health providers to ensure that students can get the support they need, more directly.

Finally, students who experienced employment and childcare barriers seemed to benefit from having to be more organised so that they could negotiate these competing responsibilities alongside their studies. This appeared to have a positive effect on their approach to their academic responsibilities, rather than a negative effect, which gave them an advantage over younger students. Having these responsibilities also seemed to make students more motivated, perhaps because the odds were stacked against them. This findings adds some balance to the existing literature on mature students' barriers, which tends to focus on the negative consequences (Bowl, 2001; Callender, 2008; Mannay & Morgan, 2013).

## 10.4 Reflections on this Research

One of the strengths of this research is that it would be possible to apply this design to any other HE institution. Therefore, in the future I would like to repeat this research, ideally with a team of researchers across a range of HE institutions, to consider the similarities and differences in

mature students' experiences of adaptation, motivation and barriers across institutions. There are also important lessons, which would inform future research, as there are factors in the design that should be refined to gain more detailed results. For example, some students struggled to select a single answer in the survey questions on motivations and barriers, so it would be useful to collect ranked motivations and barriers instead, to capture this detail. The interviews and diary entries identified that the mature students had a range of motivations, and experienced a range of barriers during their studies, though I was unable to clearly demonstrate that their experiences were representative. If I were to do this research again, I would give students the opportunity to select multiple categories in these areas of experiences. Whilst this would make analysis more complex, I believe it would produce a more accurate and generalizable picture of student experience.

Another strength of this research is dividing mature students into smaller age groups, so it was possible to understand differences within this group. Whilst there were lots of similarities between the traditional-age group and the youngest mature category (21-24), particularly evident in their responses in both surveys, I found that there were very different attitudes to social adaptation. Whilst a lot of the literature underlines the fact that mature students are not a homogenous group (Hinton-Smith, 2012; Osborne, et al., 2004), they fail to recommend a meaningful way to divide them by their differences. This strategy might help universities and policy-makers to make more informed decisions about mature students, to help retain them longer and provide more effective ways of recruiting them into HE. As the older age groups were so small, future research would be useful to consider how well these categories work on a larger sample. It would also be useful to conduct this research at a different type of university, such as a post-1992 institution, where mature students are likely to be in larger numbers. This might also reveal if young mature students (21-24) across HE institutions have similar attitudes and experiences to this cohort, or if their experiences are more like the older mature students within their institution.

Finally, the use of the different levels of data provided some context to the smaller-scale findings, but if this research had been completed over the full three years, this approach could have been used to better effect. For example, drop-out data would have been helpful in looking at whether the effects of barriers and slow adaptation affected the wider cohort of mature student in the same way as the interview and diary sample. Once this data is made available, this type of analysis could add more context to the findings contained in this thesis, which would be useful to widening participation and student welfare practitioners.

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## APPENDIX 1: First Year Questionnaire

Experiencing University Life: First impressions

**My name is Charlotte Sutton and I am a postgraduate researcher at the University of [REDACTED] I am conducting research on students' experiences of University life.**

**Please could you answer the following questions relating to your personal characteristics, your motivation for starting an undergraduate degree and your worries about university?**

**This information will be used for a piece of doctoral research, which considers whether age affects experiences at university. Any data included in publications arising from the research will be anonymised so that you cannot be identified individually.**

What is the full title of your degree? .....

What month/year were you born? (e.g. 07/1985).....

Are you: male ☐ female ☐ or other ☐

What is your ethnic group? (please circle)

White: British/English/ Scottish/Welsh/ Northern Irish	White: Irish	White: Other	Asian/Asian British: Indian	Asian/Asian British: Pakistani	Asian/Asian British: Bangladeshi	Asian/Asi an British: Chinese	Asian/Asian British: Other Asian
Black/Black British: Caribbean	Black/ Black British: African	Black/ Black British: Other	Mixed/ multiple ethnic group: White and Black Caribbean	Mixed/ multiple ethnic group: White and Asian	Mixed/ multiple ethnic group: Other mixed	Other ethnic groups: Arab	Other ethnic group: (please detail)

Are you a: Home student (UK)? ☐ EU student? ☐ International student? ☐

(UK students only: Home Postcode :.....)

Do you have responsibilities for the care of:

Children? ☐ Older relatives? ☐ A person with disabilities? ☐ Other: ..... N/A ☐

What is the highest qualification you have achieved so far? (e.g. A level/Access to HE/BTEC/HNC)

.....

Where did you complete your highest qualifications?

State comprehensive school ☐ State Grammar school ☐ Fee paying school ☐

Further Education College ☐ 6<sup>th</sup> Form College ☐ other (please state): .....

Have you ever had to board at school? Yes ☐ No ☐

### Experiencing University Life: First impressions

What was your main motivation for coming to University? (Select one only)

It was the natural next step ☐ I need this qualification for a particular job ☐ I want to make my family proud ☐

To increase my earning potential ☐ I wanted a challenge ☐ I didn't know what else to do ☐

Other reason .....

Why did you choose to study at this university? (Select only the most important reason)

It has a good reputation ☐ It is close to home ☐ Because of this course ☐ I like the campus ☐

It was recommended to me ☐ Because of the open day I attended ☐ I like the city ☐

Other reason .....

What worries you most about university? (Select one only)

Being able to attend lectures and seminars ☐ The standard of work required ☐ Fitting in at university ☐

Organising my study time effectively ☐ Managing my finances ☐ Accessing support (e.g. academic/personal) ☐

Other .....

I have no worries about university ☐

Where are you living during term-time?

Student Halls ☐ Other student accommodation (e.g. shared house/student flat) ☐

Renting privately ☐ Living with family ☐ Own Home ☐ Other .....

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

**\* If you would like the opportunity to contribute to more detailed research on student experiences, please write your details here:**

Name: ..... Email address: .....

**Please be advised that this information will only be used for this research project and all your personal details will be kept confidential and anonymised when published, so you cannot be individually identified.**

## APPENDIX 2: Second Year Questionnaire

Experiencing University Life: Second Year

**My name is Charlotte Sutton and I am a postgraduate researcher at the University of [REDACTED] I am conducting longitudinal research on students' experiences of university life. This is the second questionnaire completed by your year group.**

**Please could you answer the following questions relating to your personal characteristics, your motivation for continuing your studies, your academic performance and your worries about university?**

**This information will be used for a piece of doctoral research, which considers whether age affects experiences at university. Any data included in publications arising from the research will be anonymised so that you cannot be identified individually.**

What is the full title of your degree? .....

Have you transferred from a different degree since starting university? Yes ☐ No ☐

What month/year were you born? (e.g.07/1985).....

Are you: male ☐ female ☐ or other? ☐

What is your ethnic group? (please circle)

White: British/English/ Scottish/Welsh /Northern Irish	White: Irish	White: Other	Asian or Asian British: Indian	Asian or Asian British: Pakistani	Asian or Asian British: Chinese	Asian or Asian British: Other
Black or Black British: Afro- Caribbean	Black or Black British: African	Mixed/ multiple ethnic group: White and Black	Mixed/ multiple ethnic group: White and Asian	Mixed/ multiple ethnic group: Other mixed	Other ethnic group: (please detail)	

Are you a: Home student (UK)? ☐ EU student? ☐ International student? ☐

(UK STUDENTS ONLY: Home postcode before starting university :.....)

Do you currently have responsibilities for the care of: (Tick any that apply)

Children? ☐ Older relatives? ☐ A person with disabilities? ☐ Other: .....

What is the strongest feeling you had about being back at university? (Select one only)

I was looking forward to learning ☐ I was looking forward to being with my friends ☐

I was worried about my studies ☐ I was worried about being on my own ☐ Other: .....

### Experiencing University Life: Second Year

How well do you think you performed in your studies last year? (Select one only)

I performed really well ☐

I didn't perform to the best of my ability because: It took me a while to get used to what was required ☐

I had personal/health problems ☐

I did the minimum required to pass the year ☐

I got distracted by other things in my life ☐

☐ Other reason (please detail): .....

What kept you motivated to study last year? (Select one only)

Determination ☐ The fear of failing ☐ Enjoyment of the subject ☐ My end goal ☐ I wasn't motivated ☐

Other: .....

Who helped you to stay motivated to study last year? (Tick any that apply)

My family ☐ My friends ☐ My partner/boyfriend/girlfriend ☐ My tutors/lecturers ☐

No one motivates me ☐ Other: .....

How do you feel about your choice of course? (Select one only)

I am enjoying everything on my course ☐ I enjoy most of what we study ☐ I'm not enjoying it so far ☐

Other: .....

What worries you most about university? (Select one only)

Being able to attend lectures and seminars ☐ The standard of work required ☐ Fitting in at university ☐

Organising my study time effectively ☐ Managing my finances ☐ Accessing support (e.g. academic/personal) ☐

Other ..... I have no worries about university ☐

Where are you living during term-time?

Student Halls ☐ Shared house/flat with my friends ☐ Shared house/flat with others ☐

Renting alone ☐ Living with family ☐ Own Home ☐ Other: .....

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

## APPENDIX 3: Participant Information Sheet

### Title of Project: Does Age Matter in Higher Education?

**Please read carefully through all the information before making a decision on your participation**

My name is Charlotte Sutton and I am a postgraduate student at the [case study] University. I am conducting a piece of research which considers variation in the experiences of different aged students. I am interested in understanding whether students have similar motivations, experiences and transitions within Higher Education (HE), regardless of their age.

If you agree to take part in this research, I will ask you to complete regular diary entries (weekly) detailing both your experiences and your observations, using an online diary form on the university website. I will also ask you to consider being interviewed once a term to reflect on your diary entries and additional experiences in HE. This will usually be on campus, but may take place using Skype on occasion.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you wish to no longer take part in the research, at any point, you have the right to withdraw and there will be no pressure to stay.

All the information you give **will be anonymous and confidential** and only used for the purposes of this research and will only be accessible to me. No third parties will have access to any of the information you provide.

The interviews will be recorded using an audio device, to enable me to document what was said. All recordings will be destroyed once they have been transcribed and anonymised.

The transcribed data and diary entries will be collected and stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and will be disposed of in a secure manner. The information will be used in a way that will not allow you to be identified individually. Your contribution will be used only for the purposes of a PhD research project and subsequent academic publications detailing the findings of this project.

Once the research is complete you will be debriefed on the findings and you will have the opportunity to discuss your participation in this project. If you are not sure about anything mentioned above, please do not hesitate to ask me.

If you agree to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. The consent form will not be used to identify you. It will be filed separately from all other information.

Thank you very much for your time and help with this important area of research.

Kind regards,

Charlotte Sutton.



## APPENDIX 4: Consent Form

**Research Project Consent form**

I agree to take part in the Does Age Matter in HE study which is research towards the submission of a PhD thesis in Sociology at the University of [REDACTED].

(Select the options you consent to by ticking the adjacent box)

I agree to detail my university experiences and observations in diary entry forms on a regular basis: ☐

I also agree to be interviewed once a term, which will be arranged to suit my availability and commitments. ☐

I have had the project fully explained to me and I have read the information statement about the project which I may keep for my own personal records. I understand that my own contribution will be made anonymous and may be used only for the purposes of a PhD research project and subsequent publication of the findings of this project. I have been made aware that I can withdraw from the research at any time.

I also understand that this project will be carried out in accordance with the University of Leicester's Code of Research Ethics and the Equality Act 2010. Material gathered as part of this study will be treated as confidential and securely stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

**Name [PRINT]** .....

**Signature** .....

**Date** .....

## APPENDIX 5: Interview Schedule 1 (November 2015)

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research. In doing so you are deemed to have given your informed consent to take part in this project. All participants are covered by the ESRC (2011) ethical code of practice so that your responses are treated confidentially and stored on a password locked computer. When writing up the data from this project your identity and the identities of anyone else discussed will be protected by being anonymised. As a face to face/ telephonic interview, the following schedule of questions is likely to take about 30-45 minutes to discuss.

Just to remind you of the focus of this study: We are trying to find out about students' experiences at university and whether their age helps or hinders them in terms of adapting to the university environment, as well as their motivation to continue learning and succeed.

### **Adapting:**

- Can you remember how you felt when you first attended a lecture?  
(belongingness/fear)
- Was it the same, or a different feeling when you attended the first seminar?
- How do you feel about attending lectures and seminars now (anxiety/motiv)
- Which induction events or fresher's week events did you attend?
- What are the other students like on your course? (friendliness/age-discrim)
- Are the demands at uni different to the demands at college/school/work (what they did before)? How well have you adapted to these differences? (reading/studying etc.)

### **Barriers/motivation:**

- What other responsibilities do you have in addition to studying?  
(Job/kids/dependents)
- Do your other responsibilities/living arrangements/family circumstances affect your learning? (anxiety/motiv)
- Has your social life/personal life affected your ability to attend uni/study so far?
- What have been the highlights of your experience at uni so far?
- And the lowlights (difficulties/challenges)? (money/relationships/level of study)
- When you have experienced difficulties/challenges, what has kept you motivated?
- Have people at uni (student/tutors/support staff) helped at all with these difficulties/challenges?

### **Expectations:**

- Is this what you expected your course/uni to be like?
- What are you looking forward to over the next term and what worries you?

## APPENDIX 6: Interview Schedule 2 (March 2016)

Thank you for agreeing to continue taking part in this research by completing diary entries and by attending this interview. All participants are covered by the ESRC (2011) ethical code of practice so that your responses are treated confidentially and stored on a password locked computer. When writing up the data from this project your identity and the identities of anyone else discussed will be protected by being anonymised. As a face to face/ telephonic interview, the following schedule of questions is likely to take about 30-45 minutes to discuss.

Just to remind you of the focus of this study: We are trying to find out about students' experiences at university and whether their age helps or hinders them in terms of adapting to the university environment, as well as their motivation to continue learning and succeed.

### **Adapting:**

- Where you glad to return to university after the new year or anxious?
- Do you think that being at university has changed you?
- How did you cope with the stress of exams/assignments at the end of last term.
- Which induction events or fresher's week events did you attend?
- What are the other students like on your course? (friendliness/age-discrim)
- Are the demands at uni different to the demands at college/school/work (what they did before)? How well have you adapted to these differences? (reading/studying etc.)

### **Barriers/motivation:**

- What other responsibilities do you have in addition to studying?  
(Job/kids/dependents)
- Do your other responsibilities/living arrangements/family circumstances affect your learning? (anxiety/motiv)
- Has your social life/personal life affected your ability to attend uni/study so far?
- What have been the highlights of your experience at uni so far?
- And the lowlights (difficulties/challenges)? (money/relationships/level of study)
- When you have experienced difficulties/challenges, what has kept you motivated?
- Have people at uni (student/tutors/support staff) helped at all with these difficulties/challenges?

### **Expectations:**

- Is this what you expected your course/uni to be like?
- What are you looking forward to over the next term and what worries you?

## APPENDIX 7: Interview Schedule 3 (November 2016)

### **The undergraduate experience-**

Thank you for agreeing to continue taking part in this research by completing diary entries and by attending this interview. All participants are covered by the ESRC (2011) ethical code of practice so that your responses are treated confidentially and stored on a password locked computer. When writing up the data from this project your identity and the identities of anyone else discussed will be protected by being anonymised. As a face to face/ telephonic interview, the following schedule of questions is likely to take about 30-45 minutes to discuss.

Just to remind you of the focus of this study: We are trying to find out about students' experiences at university and whether their age helps or hinders them in terms of adapting to the university environment, as well as their motivation to continue learning and succeed.

### **Adapting:**

- Draw from diaries/last interview where appropriate
- How did you feel about returning this academic year (confidence)?
- Where are you living this year/who with/how is it going?
- How did you find being at home over the summer/what did you do?
- What about friendships at home/uni?
- Who supports you with work?
- How do you feel about the topics this term/assessments?

### **Barriers/motivation:**

- Draw from diaries/last interview where appropriate
- In accommodation/course/new level of assessment?
- Conflicts with work?
- And the lowlights (difficulties/challenges)? (money/relationships/level of study)
- What has kept you motivated this term?

### **Expectations:**

- Are you enjoying your subject?
- Is it as you thought it would be (dreams/support)?
- What are you looking forward to over the next term and what worries you?

## APPENDIX 8: Interview Schedule 4 (March 2017)

Thank you for agreeing to continue taking part in this research by completing diary entries and by attending this interview. All participants are covered by the ESRC (2011) ethical code of practice so that your responses are treated confidentially and stored on a password locked computer. When writing up the data from this project your identity and the identities of anyone else discussed will be protected by being anonymised. As a face to face/ telephonic interview, the following schedule of questions is likely to take about 30-45 minutes to discuss.

Just to remind you of the focus of this study: We are trying to find out about students' experiences at university and whether their age helps or hinders them in terms of adapting to the university environment, as well as their motivation to continue learning and succeed.

### **Adapting:**

- When do you feel a sense of belonging at university (lectures/classes)?
- Are there certain people who make you feel that belonging?
- Do you think that being at university has changed you?
- How are you coping with the stress of exams/assignments?
- Have the demands been different this year & if so, how have you coped with them?

### **Barriers:**

- Lowlights of this year (difficulties/challenges)? (money/relationships/level of study)
- What has got in the way of your studying? (Job/kids/dependents/relationships)
- How did these get in the way?
- How did you resolve these challenges?
- Has support been there when you needed it?/do you know where to get support?

### **Motivation:**

- What have been the highlights of your experience at uni this year?
- When you have experienced difficulties/challenges, what has kept you motivated?
- How motivated are you to do assessments/exams at the moment?

### **Expectations:**

- Happy with grades?
- Is this what you expected your course/uni to be like?
- looking forward: worries and enthusiasm

## APPENDIX 9: Diary Entry Form



## Does age matter in higher education?

### About the project

I hope that you are all coping well at this stressful time of year. I'm just about keeping it together, by writing every day and night, and I'm dreaming about writing!! I'll be glad when the writing is over for a bit.

I'm really keen to hear how things are going for you, so I'd be really grateful if you could let me know how you are, and how you have been getting with your studies, by completing a diary form. The link is below.

As you know, all your entries are **confidential** and can only be accessed by me. Your comments and experiences will only be used for the purposes of this research. Published information will be anonymised and used in a way that will not allow participants to be identified.

If you have any questions, or concerns, please don't hesitate to contact me at any time on [ces43@le.ac.uk](mailto:ces43@le.ac.uk).

Thank you,

Charlotte.



Quick Links: [Complete a 'Being an Undergraduate Student' diary entry.](#)

### Diary Entry Form: 'Being an Undergraduate Student'

[Read More...](#)

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[Share](#)

## Diary Entry Form: 'Being an Undergraduate Student'

Your E-Mail Address ■

### 1. Reflection

What have you enjoyed this term? ■

Please explain your answer.

### 2. Motivation

What has motivated you to do assignments and exams? ■

Please explain your answer.

### 3. Adapting

Do you think you have adapted well to life at university? ■

Please explain your answer, in detail

### 4. Challenges

What were your biggest challenges this year? ■

Has anything got in the way of your studies?

If applicable

### 5. Support

Who has helped you, this term? ■

e.g. with your studies, motivation, challenges, etc.

Has university been like you expected it would be?

Please explain your answer

Submit

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## APPENDIX 10: Tables & Charts



Table 1: Ethnicity of Case Study Cohort, by Age Group

Ethnicity	17-20		21-24		25-29		30-39		40+		Total
Arab	14	0.5%	1	0.4%							15
Asian/Asian British Bangladeshi	43	1.5%	1	0.4%							44
Asian or Asian British - Indian	313	11.1%	32	13.6%	1	3%					346
Asian or Asian British - Pakistani	112	4.0%	15	6.4%	2	6.1%					129
Black or Black British - African	335	11.8%	13	5.5%	5	15.2%	3	14.3%	2	15.4%	358
Black or Black British - Caribbean	63	2.2%	2	0.8%							65
Chinese	54	1.9%	7	3.0%							61
I prefer not to say	24	0.8%	5	2.1%			1	4.8%			30
Mixed - White and Asian	60	2.1%	4	1.7%	1	3%					65
Mixed - White and Black African	18	0.6%			1	3%					19
Mixed - White and Black Caribbean	32	1.1%	3	1.3%	1	3%					36
Not known	32	1.1%	8	3.4%	3	9.1%	4	19%			47
Other Asian grp	88	3.1%	10	4.2%	1	3%			1	7.7%	100
Other Black group	17	0.6%									17
Other ethnic grp	16	0.6%	2	0.8%							18
Other mixed grp	42	1.5%	3	1.3%							45
Other White grp	9	0.3%									9
White	1552	54.9%	128	54.2%	17	51.5%	13	61.9%	10	76.9%	1720
White Scottish	4	0.1%			1	3%					5
Missing			2	0.8%							2
Total	2828		236		33		21		13		3131

Table 2: 2015/16 Case Study Cohort (UK Students) Choice of Subject, by Age

	17-20		21-24		25-29		30-39		40+		Total
<b>Archaeology and Ancient History</b>	59	90.8%	5	7.7%					1	1.5%	65
<b>Biological Sciences</b>	251	95.4%	7	2.7%	2	0.8%	2	0.8%	1	0.4%	263
<b>Chemistry</b>	107	96.4%	2	1.8%	2	1.8%					111
<b>Criminology</b>	74	93.7%	3	3.8%	1	1.3%	1	1.3%			79
<b>Economics</b>	217	98.2%	4	1.8%							221
<b>Engineering</b>	170	84.2%	28	13.9%	3	1.5%			1	0.5%	202
<b>English</b>	150	94.3%	6	3.8%			2	1.3%	1	0.6%	159
<b>Geography</b>	93	96.9%	2	2.1%	1	1%					96
<b>Geology</b>	89	92.7%	4	4.2%	1	1%	2	2.1%			96
<b>History</b>	206	94.5%	8	3.7%	2	0.9%			2	0.9%	218
<b>History of Art and Film</b>	36	97.3%	1	2.7%							37
<b>Informatics</b>	124	93.2%	7	5.3%	1	0.8%	1	0.8%			133
<b>Law</b>	152	93.3%	9	5.5%	1	0.6%	1	0.6%			163
<b>Management</b>	262	96%	8	2.9%	3	1.1%					273
<b>Mathematics</b>	129	94.2%	7	5.1%	1	0.7%					137
<b>Media and Communication</b>	42	93.3%	1	2.2%	1	2.2%	1	2.2%			45
<b>Medical School</b>	144	56.5%	104	40.8%	6	2.4%	1	0.4%			255
<b>Modern Languages</b>	59	90.8%	2	3.1%	1	1.5%	1	1.5%	2	3.1%	65
<b>No Department</b>	18	56.25%	10	31.25%	2	6.25%	2	6.25%			32
<b>Physics and Astronomy</b>	122	95.3%	4	3.1%					2	1.6%	128
<b>Politics and International Relations</b>	124	96.9%	3	2.3%	1	0.8%					128
<b>Psychology</b>	148	89.7%	9	5.5%	2	1.2%	4	2.4%	2	1.2%	165
<b>Sociology</b>	52	89.7%	2	3.4%	2	3.4%	1	1.7%	1		58

HIGHEST- QUALIFICATION	I didn't know what else to do	I need this qualification for a particular job	I want to make my family proud	I wanted a challenge	It was the natural next step	Missing	Other reason	To increase my earning potential
A level/BTEC	0	6	0	0	3	0	0	1
	0.0%	60.0%	0.0%	0.0%	30.0%	0.0%	0.0%	10.0%
A level/GCE/ Scottish Highers	15	151	13	28	304	3	16	80
	2.5%	24.8%	2.1%	4.6%	49.8%	.5%	2.6%	13.1%
A level/IB	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Access to HE	0	8	1	5	4	0	2	7
	0.0%	29.6%	3.7%	18.5%	14.8%	0.0%	7.4%	25.9%
Bachelor Degree	1	9	1	3	3	0	0	3
	5.0%	45.0%	5.0%	15.0%	15.0%	0.0%	0.0%	15.0%
BTec	0	7	5	2	20	0	2	7
	0.0%	16.3%	11.6%	4.7%	46.5%	0.0%	4.7%	16.3%
Foundation/ Pre-U qualification	1	3	2	3	12	0	2	2
	4.0%	12.0%	8.0%	12.0%	48.0%	0.0%	8.0%	8.0%
International A level equivalent	0	4	1	2	15	0	4	5
	0.0%	12.9%	3.2%	6.5%	48.4%	0.0%	12.9%	16.1%
International Baccalaureate	3	6	1	1	19	1	3	2
	8.3%	16.7%	2.8%	2.8%	52.8%	2.8%	8.3%	5.6%
Missing	1	1	0	1	7	0	1	2
	7.7%	7.7%	0.0%	7.7%	53.8%	0.0%	7.7%	15.4%
Postgrad Qualification	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	1
	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	25.0%	0.0%	50.0%	25.0%
Vocational Diploma	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	2
	0.0%	0.0%	20.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	40.0%	40.0%

Table 3: Qualifications and Motivation for Coming to University

Table 4: Average Distance from Home by Motivation

Main motivation for coming to university	Mean distance from home	N	Standard Deviation
I didn't know what else to do	91.8979	19	48.18564
I need this qualification for a particular job	76.7204	160	52.05358
I want to make my family proud	78.4594	17	35.54125
I wanted a challenge	67.4369	32	51.69997
It was the natural next step	84.5811	292	48.12276
Other reason	101.6078	23	83.22830
To increase my earning potential	78.9982	91	66.14472
Total	81.5851	636	53.61710

Table 5: Caring Responsibilities and Motivation

	I didn't know what else to do	I need this qualification for a particular job	I want to make my family proud	I wanted a challenge	It was the natural next step	Other reason	To increase my earning potential
A person with disabilities				2	3		
Children		2	1	1	2	1	1
Older relatives		2			1	1	3
Animals						1	
Autistic Sibling			1				
Parent		1					

<b>Children and Grandmother</b>						1	
<b>Total</b>	0	5	2	3	6	4	4

Table 6: Motivation to Enter HE by Sex (First Impression Survey Responses)

Sex and Main Motivation for Coming to Uni		17-20	21-24	25-29	30-39	40+
Male	I didn't know what else to do	11 3.4%	1 4.3%			
	I need this qualification for a particular job	67 20.9%	4 17.4%	4 57.1%		1 16.7%
	I want to make my family proud	10 3.1%	3 13.0%	1 14.3%	1 33.3%	
	I wanted a challenge	18 5.6%	3 13.0%	2 28.6%		2 33.3%
	It was the natural next step	153 47.7%	9 39.1%			
	Missing	2 0.6%				
	Other reason	14 4.4%	1 4.3%		1 33.3%	3 50.0%
	To increase my earning potential	46 14.3%	2 8.7%		1 33.3%	
	Total	321	23	7	3	6
Female	I didn't know what else to do	8 1.9%				
	I need this qualification for a particular job	106 24.9%	9 42.9%	2 40.0%		
	I want to make my family proud	10 2.3%				
	I wanted a challenge	17 4.0%	1 4.8%		2 50.0%	
	It was the natural next step	218 51.2%	4 19.0%	1 20.0%		
	Missing	2 0.5%				
	Other reason	12 2.8%	1 4.8%			2 66.7%
	To increase my earning potential	53 12.4%	6 28.6%	2 40.0%	2 50.0%	1 33.3%
	Total	426	21	5	4	3
Other	I didn't know what else to do	1 100.0%				

Table 7: How Did You Feel About Coming Back to University?

	17-20	21-24	25-29	30-39	40+	Missing	Total
<b>I was looking forward to being with my friends</b>	196	11	0	0	0	0	207
	32.9%	15.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	29.3%
<b>I was looking forward to learning</b>	246	38	16	4	0	6	310
	41.3%	53.5%	69.6%	80.0%	0.0%	66.7%	43.9%
<b>I was worried about being on my own</b>	19	2	1	0	1	0	23
	3.2%	2.8%	4.3%	0.0%	33.3%	0.0%	3.3%
<b>I was worried about my studies</b>	115	18	5	1	1	2	142
	19.3%	25.4%	21.7%	20.0%	33.3%	22.2%	20.1%
<b>missing</b>	3	1	1	0	0	0	5
	0.5%	1.4%	4.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%
<b>other</b>	16	1	0	0	1	1	19
	2.7%	1.4%	0.0%	0.0%	33.3%	11.1%	2.7%

Table 9: Second Year Enjoyment and How Students Felt About Coming Back to University

	I was looking forward to being with my friends	I was looking forward to learning	I was worried about being on my own	I was worried about my studies	missing	other	Total
I am enjoying everything on my course	17 8.2%	57 18.4%	3 13.0%	13 9.2%			90 12.7%
I enjoy most of what we study	172 83.1%	238 76.8%	17 73.9%	109 76.8%	2 40.0%	14 73.7%	552 78.2%
I'm not enjoying it so far	12 5.8%	6 1.9%	2 8.7%	16 11.3%	1 20.0%	4 21.1%	41 5.8%
Missing	3 1.4%	8 2.3%		3 2.1%	2 40.0%		16 2.1%
other	3 1.4%	1 0.3%	1 4.3%	1 0.7%		1 5.3%	7 1.0%
Total	207	310	23	142	5	19	706
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%



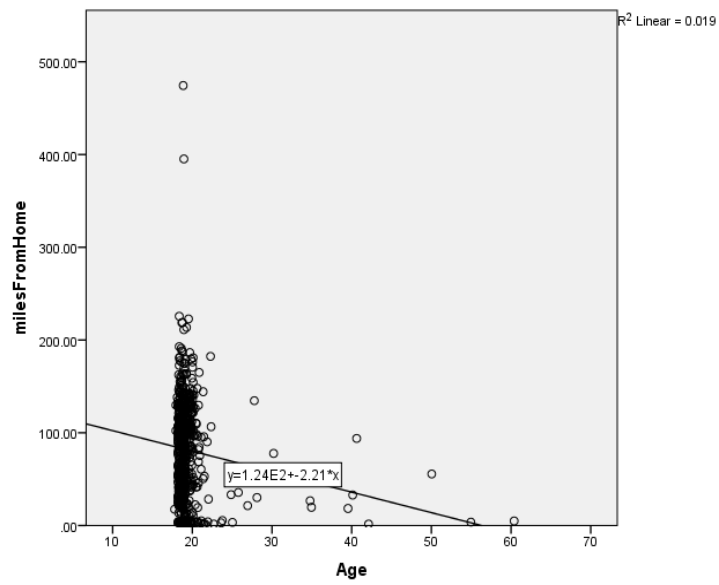
Table 10: Enjoyment and Age

	17-20	21-24	25-29	30-39	40+
<b>I am enjoying everything on my course</b>	67	12	6	1	
	11.3%	16.9%	26.1%	20.0%	
<b>I enjoy most of what we study</b>	480	49	14	2	3
	80.7%	69.0%	60.9%	40.0%	100.0%
<b>I'm not enjoying it so far</b>	33	6	2		
	5.5%	8.5%	8.7%		
<b>Missing</b>	12	3	1	1	
	1.9%	4.2%	4.3%	20.0%	
<b>other</b>	4	1		1	
	0.7%	1.4%		20.0%	

Table 11: 2015/16 Cohort Disability Declarations

	17-20	21-24	25-29	30-39	40+	Under 17	Total
<b>No disability</b>	3130	314	65	57	54	2	3622
	90.9%	82.6%	71.4%	69.5%	72%	100%	88.9%
<b>Blind or serious visual impairment</b>	5	2					7
	0.1%	0.5%					0.2%
<b>Deaf or serious hearing impairment</b>	4		1				5
	0.1%		1.1%				0.1%
<b>Long standing illness/ health condition</b>	34	6	3	2	4		49
	1%	1.6%	3.3%	2.4%	5.3%		1.2%
<b>Mental health condition e.g. depression, schizophr</b>	52	8	6	8	2		76
	1.5%	2.1%	6.6%	9.8%	2.7%		1.9%
<b>Other disability, impairment or medical condition</b>	16	1	1				18
	0.5%	0.3%	1.1%				0.4%
<b>Physical impairment or mobility issues</b>	7	2	2	1			12
	0.2%	0.5%	2.2%	1.2%			0.3%
<b>Social/communication impairment e.g. Asperger's</b>	24		1	1			26
	0.7%		1.1%	1.2%			0.6%
<b>Specific learning difficulty e.g. dyslexia, AD(H)D</b>	135	38	7	5	4		189
	3.9%	10%	7.7%	6.1%	5.3%		4.6%
<b>Two or more impairments/ disabling conditions</b>	15	2		1	1		19
	0.4%	0.5%		1.2%	1.3%		0.5%
<b>Missing</b>	1	4	5	7	10		27
	0.0%	1.1%	5.5%	8.5%	13.3%		0.7%
<b>Not Known</b>	14	3					17
	0.4%	0.8%					0.4%
<b>Information Refused</b>	5						5
	0.1%						0.1%
<b>Total</b>	3442	380	91	82	75	2	4072

Charts 1: Miles from Home



Charts 2: Time from Home

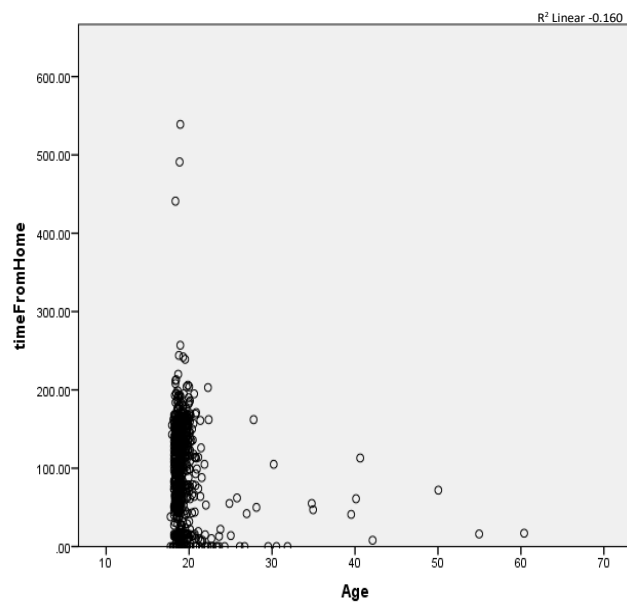


Table 12: Performance Last Year: I didn't perform to the best of my ability because:

	17-20	21-24	25-29	30-39	40+	Missing	Total
I did the minimum required to pass the year	76	4					80
	12.8%	5.6%					11.3%
I got distracted by other things in my life	81	8	2			2	93
	13.6%	11.3%	8.7%			22.2%	13.2%
I had personal/health problems	42	6	1			1	50
	7.1%	8.5%	4.3%			11.1%	7.1%
it took me a while to get used to what was required	174	21	4	2	2	2	205
	29.2%	29.6%	17.4%	40.0%	66.7%	22.2%	29.0%
Other	9	4	2	1		3	19
	1.5%	5.6%	8.7%	20.0%		33.3%	2.7%
Total	595	71	23	5	3	9	706

Table 13: How Well do you Think You Performed Last Year?

		17-20	21-24	25-29	30-39	40+	Missing	Total
50/50	Count	1						1
	Expected	0.8						1.0
I didn't perform to the best of my ability	Count	381	44	9	3	1	7	445
	Expected	375.0	44.8	14.5	3.2	1.9	5.7	445.0
I performed OK	Count	1						1
	Expected	0.8						1.0
I performed really well	Count	198	24	13	1	2	2	240
	Expected	202.3	24.1	7.8	1.7	1.0	3.1	240.0
Missing	Count	14	3	1	1	0	0	19
	Expected	16.0	1.9	0.6	0.1	0.1	0.2	19.0
Total	Count	595	71	23	5	3	9	706
	Expected	595.0	71.0	23.0	5.0	3.0	9.0	706.0

Table 14: Why Didn't You Perform to the Best of your Ability: Expected Counts

		17-20	21-24	25-29	30-39	40+	Missing	Total
<b>I did the minimum required to pass the year</b>	Count	76	4	0	0	0	0	80
	Expected	67.4	8.0	2.6	0.6	0.3	1.0	80.0
<b>I got distracted by other things in my life</b>	Count	81	8	2	0	0	2	93
	Expected	78.4	9.4	3.0	0.7	0.4	1.2	93.0
<b>I had personal/health problems</b>	Count	42	6	1	0	0	1	50
	Expected	42.1	5.0	1.6	0.4	0.2	0.6	50.0
<b>It took me a while to get used to what was required</b>	Count	174	21	4	2	2	2	205
	Expected	172.8	20.6	6.7	1.5	0.9	2.6	205.0
<b>Other</b>	Count	9	4	2	1	0	3	19
	Expected	16.0	1.9	0.6	0.1	0.1	0.2	19.0