

# The impact of Access on mature learners

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.25.2.195>

**Abstract** As director of a large-scale, part-time distance learning Access programme for the past ten years, I have been reflecting on a career spent widening participation in higher education to mature learners from under-represented backgrounds. This discussion piece synthesises learning from scholarship undertaken over the last decade, exploring the transformational impact an Access preparatory programme can have on disadvantaged adult learners.

**Key words** Access to higher education; preparation for HE; supporting adults returning to HE; widening participation and success

## Introduction: mature learners and Access

Policies aimed at widening higher education (HE) participation in the UK were stimulated as long ago as the Dearing Report (1997), and since then universities have spent millions on aspiration and achievement-raising activities with school pupils. However, preparatory provision aimed at mature learners pre-dates this significantly. Access to HE programmes, designed to support mature learners lacking conventional HE entry qualifications have been offered since the late 1970s. Access programmes have a long history of preparing mature learners with the skills and confidence to succeed in HE and can prevent unnecessary attrition from undergraduate study. Research from James and Busher (2018) demonstrates that mature students progressing from an Access course have enhanced subsequent achievement, attainment, retention and continuation, as well as greater student satisfaction. Scholarship on Access can provide valuable insights into 'what works' in widening participation (WP).

The scale of provision may surprise some – last year 40,000 mature students took a one-year Access to HE Diploma from 1200 courses offered in further education (FE) colleges, many progressing to a local partner university to follow a vocational degree pathway. At the UK Open University (OU), which has no prior entry requirements for undergraduate study, 4500 students annually choose to register on an OU Access module to build

confidence and prepare for degree study. Providing a similar function (but not exclusively aimed at mature students), many universities have recognised the need to offer additional preparation for learners who fail to meet entry requirements; 700 foundation year (Level 0) programmes are now offered annually through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS).

Access programmes have been a beacon for mature learners – the first black principal of an Oxbridge College, Simon Woolley, admits (BBC Radio 4, 2023) owing his professional journey (from highly inauspicious beginnings) to stumbling across an Access course in his twenties. Viktoria Lloyd-Barlow, recently longlisted for the Booker Prize for literature (Singh, 2023), left school with no qualifications and after having her children took an Access course prior to taking a literature degree and a PhD in creative writing.

## Policy context

Unfortunately, efforts to widen access and participation are not always aligned with the needs of mature students. It is regrettable mature learners are rarely acknowledged in HE policy, because it is well established that the numbers of both full-time and part-time mature learners – defined in the UK by the Higher Education Statistics Agency as any student over 21 years of age – are in decline (Office for Students, 2021). My research with mature and part-time learners over the last decade (Butcher, 2020) suggests many older learners lack confidence, which can be compounded by:

1. the risk in terms of perceived benefits weighed against the cost of tuition fees in England and Wales, and the personal investment in terms of time (Butcher, 2015a).
2. the unwelcoming inflexibility of many university programmes to meet the needs of adults who may have a range of responsibilities beyond studying (Butcher and Rose-Adams, 2015).
3. the challenging inadequacy and inaccessibility of Information, Advice and Guidance required by adult learners to navigate complex spaghetti progression pathways into and through HE (Butcher, 2015b).

However, three policies have serendipitously aligned recently, which have the potential to enhance HE provision aimed at adults.

First is the long-heralded credit-based funding system Lifelong Learning Entitlement (Universities UK, 2023) due to start in 2025. This offers a four-year loan entitlement to the value of £37,000, introducing greater flexibility via modular, non-linear study and the extension of maintenance support to part-time learners. While initially focused on addressing higher-level skills gaps, this shift to module-based funding inevitably challenges the primacy of the conventional three-year degree and is intended to increase FE/HE collaboration, both of which could benefit mature learners by offering greater flexibility.

Second is the Augar Review (2018), the 'Post-18 Review' which originally proposed bridging courses to mitigate attrition at Level 4. This appears to have finally burst into life with a government directive limiting the fees universities can charge for foundation year programmes to the (much cheaper) cost of FE-based provision. This could reinvigorate local, college-based access to HE provision and begin to address mature student concerns about cost.

Third, the Office for Students (OfS, 2023) has introduced an Equality of Opportunity Risk Register, with five out of 12 categories of risks to equality of opportunity associated with access:

- Risk 1: Knowledge and skills
- Risk 2: Information and guidance
- Risk 3: Perception of higher education
- Risk 4: Application success rates
- Risk 5: Limited choice of course type and delivery mode

All five risks resonate with the challenges facing older learners who lack confidence and have the potential to influence university Access and Participation plans by identifying the specific barriers facing mature students.

## Obstacles to Access for mature students

Too often, universities and policymakers have unintentionally drifted into deficit models when seeking to address equity issues, focusing resources on supporting atomised characteristics of

disadvantage (blaming the individual learner and seeking to 'fix' them) via simplistic markers such as 'ethnic minority' or 'disabled'.

Colleagues working in WP will be very aware of the impact of intersectional disadvantages (Nichols and Stahl, 2019) on under-represented students in HE. A mix of characteristics and backgrounds can undermine confidence and present a toxic challenge to successful engagement in HE. These can include:

- Poor socio-economic status (as measured by the Index of Multiple Deprivation)
- Working-class background
- Living in areas with low HE participation
- Certain disadvantaged minority ethnic backgrounds
- Disability and/or long-term chronic illness
- Low or alternative prior entry qualifications
- First generation in family to attend HE
- Extended time out of education
- Care-experienced background

For adult learners age compounds all these disadvantages, impacting negatively on confidence and decisions later in life to apply to, and succeed in, HE. Universities need to be far smarter in developing inclusive approaches to widening the participation of mature students to mitigate these obstacles.

Gorard *et al's* (2006) conceptualisation of barriers to participation offers three useful lenses through which to understand challenges facing mature learners.

## 1. Dispositional barriers

Conversations with mature students over the past decade suggest many who enter HE lack confidence and experience fragile self-esteem or 'imposter syndrome' (Parkman, 2016), both of which contribute to limited resilience:

'Because I took a break from studying, it did knock my confidence a bit – but it's been good since I started this course, there is lots of validation about how you are doing.'  
(Access student interviewee)

Unfortunately, when appended to deeply held memories of ineffective learning at school, it is hardly surprising that some mature students may appear 'needy' in terms of institutional

support and seem more likely to withdraw when life events disrupt their studies:

'When you start off it was like being in a darkened room where you can't see anything and you're kind of groping around and bumping into this and trying to find your way because you can't see.' (Access student interviewee)

Such dispositional barriers can manifest themselves as fear – for example, some social science Access students have told me they were scared to approach their tutor for support:

'I was frightened of my tutor's first call ... I remember my old school days which didn't bring back very good memories.' (Access student interviewee)

I have also heard arts and languages Access students describe their fear of poetry and music, as they had been taught at school to view such disciplines as 'too difficult' and panicking at the prospect of writing something as removed from everyday experience as an essay:

'I'd no idea how to attack an essay ... sorry, how to approach an essay.'

However, studying an Access module can have a positive impact and remove that discipline-based fear:

'I don't have a fear of poetry anymore...know that you don't have to necessarily understand all of it... you can take your time trying to understand it, to feel it...Poetry was not my strong point...it has helped me analyse a piece of poetry because before it was kind of...sparks coming out of my ears.'

Science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) Access students have reported being excited about the prospect of studying science, but being paralysed with fear of maths:

'I even feel confident in helping my son do his maths homework now. Before this course I would have struggled and would not have been confident in assisting him as it would have ended up making him more confused.'

If universities want more mature learners to engage with HE, they need to take far greater account of dispositional barriers such as lack of confidence and time-out-of learning, and respond

enthusiastically to the long-fermenting educational aspirations many adults have:

'Not sure I was able to study ... I left school 40 years ago ... a long time since I did any formal studying ... I wasn't even sure how study worked...I found it hard to even focus for more than about half an hour ... and I was really worried about my first piece of written work [but] wanted to test myself out.' (Access student interviewee)

## 2. Situational barriers

Inevitably, many mature learners will need to juggle a range of roles beyond simply identifying as a student. Wearing numerous extra hats (for example, parent, carer, employee – sometimes in several jobs) will require older students to juggle multiple priorities:

'I did Access to see if I have the capability of writing essays, and would I really enjoy learning, bearing in mind that I'm working as well – was it all too much?' (Access student interviewee)

Often mature learners attempt to study while time-poor – leaving little wriggle room with assessment deadlines when the messy complexities of adult lives intrude:

'I was concerned that I wouldn't be able to study, to put in the hours ... understand the question ... I was struggling a bit at the start ... but when you get into it, it falls into place really.' (Access student interviewee)

Situational obstacles facing adults also include money worries, amplified in times of economic austerity and rising prices, when the cost of HE fees clashes with aversion to debt for those older students who need to work extra hours to finance rent or mortgage payments and feed a family:

'I work two jobs around doing the learning as well, so just knowing that there were certain things that I could do ...when I had a spare five minutes here and there... having a list of activities that I could do, ... they'd get ticked off the list.'

Financial concerns combined with time poverty can heighten mature student fears of not being 'good enough' for HE, and lead to withdrawal:

'If I hadn't had the Access course, I don't think I would ever have gone on to an undergraduate course because I would have thought it's a lot of time and money to do something not very well ... I just would have thought maybe I'm not good enough.' (Access student interviewee)

### 3. Institutional barriers

The impact of dispositional and situational obstacles can be lessened if universities proactively address institutional barriers. Such barriers can include many hidden aspects of pedagogy – blind assumptions that HE must be delivered in a certain way. Too often, adult learners across the sector have told me they need institutions to offer far more flexibility, and to acknowledge the beneficial 'other' experiences and skills adults bring to university.

At The Open University, it has proven possible to mitigate a number of institutional barriers. The OU's three Access modules (delivered part-time over 30 weeks via distance learning) were designed as interdisciplinary preparation to succeed in undergraduate study (for example, in STEM, see Butcher *et al.*, 2018; for Arts, see Butcher and Clarke, 2021). Students are introduced to six cognate disciplines in each (and 25% of OU Access learners change their study intention as a result of learning across disciplines – preventing a key cause of subsequent withdrawal due to wrong subject choice). A fast-track version (Butcher and Curry, 2023) is offered, for those students (following an advisory conversation) who just need some confidence building after a study gap.

Drawing on institutionally funded scholarship, a structured pedagogic framework was developed (Curry and Butcher, 2021) across all modules to ensure, through repetition and signposting, students are familiar with the learning environment and do not get lost in journeying through the teaching material. The modules are organised into three blocks, beginning with print material and then transitioning to online learning (Butcher and Curry, 2022) to help prepare mature learners for subsequent study. The voices of

module authors are utilised throughout to support this shift and encourage student persistence.

Study skills are embedded through the module material, with reflective activities built in so students receive tutor feedback on their skills development as part of assessment:

'I was taking too many notes, I was highlighting and typing ... doing too many. And then when I came to do my essay, I'd written down a whole load of stuff and then I couldn't find it...' (Access student interviewee)

Reflecting on the quality and impact of the OU Access programme over the last decade, a key institutional barrier was identified - an inbuilt assumption that adults returning to education would automatically know how to learn. This could not be guaranteed, and consequently we have refined our approach to highlight the importance of learning how to learn, and transparently addressed the need for adult learners to become assessment-literate in order to reduce fear of assessment and maximise success (Butcher *et al.*, 2017).

Additionally, and within the control of institutions, the importance of an inspirational and empathetic tutor cannot be overestimated for mature learners. At the OU, Access tutors are appointed based on their understanding of the needs of adults returning to learn as much as for their disciplinary knowledge. Teaching is through a system of one-to-one telephone tutorials, with tutors proactively contacting their students at regular intervals. This has been crucial in developing trust between unconfident learners and their tutors, and ensuring less confident voices are not silenced in a group setting. Regular dialogic feedback on assessments is intended to support assimilation into what has been referred to by some learners as an 'alien' HE environment.

Tuition fees and inflexible funding support can also present insurmountable institutional barriers to adult learners. The OU made a strategic decision a decade ago to subsidise the fee for its 30-credit Access modules, and to offer a full fee waiver to students on incomes below £25K. Over 80% of OU Access students qualify for the fee waiver. This has contributed to the University's social justice mission, but has negatively affected



attrition. Consequently, we are exploring more nuanced metrics to capture what success looks like for an Access student.

## Conclusion

During a recent meeting with John Blake (Director for Fair Access and Participation at the Office for Students), OU Access students were keen to stress that the impact of their studies reaches beyond themselves as individuals, and positively influences their wider community of friends, family and neighbours.

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

Access programmes have provided an invaluable second chance for hundreds of thousands of mature students for almost 50 years. As a contribution to a more equitable society, these programmes have proven a highly cost-effective way to develop student confidence and academic skills, to say nothing of providing a pipeline of well-prepared mature learners for universities.

Much more could be done to encourage more mature students to engage with HE. Universities could address institutional barriers, by choosing to deploy resources differently. This could include:

- 'designing-in' greater inclusivity in teaching, learning and assessment, the kind of flexibilities that would benefit all students;
- considering the impact of high tuition fees and providing more financial support for mature learners, accounted for in institutional Access and Participation Plans;
- ensuring support services are accessible to all, regardless of age or mode of study (transparently avoiding the default assumption that all learners are 19 and living away from home for the first time).

For mature learners, an Access programme offers two significant mitigations to enhance success in HE. First, with empathetic tutors, dispositional barriers – including lack of self-confidence and feelings of being an imposter (HE is ‘not for the likes of me’) – can be overcome. Second, situational obstacles can be addressed, including fears about finance (offering, and promoting, fee waivers) and juggling a lack of time to study (introducing more flexible approaches to teaching, assessment and support).

The sector could learn much from Access programmes about how participation in HE can be further widened for mature learners. Many of the Access students I have spoken with over the past decade acknowledge a transformative impact on their life chances. There are significant opportunities for further research with Access learners to identify ‘what works’ to widen participation for mature learners.

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