

Theory of Change Narrative: Supporting Mature Learners in accessing higher education through Train the Trainer intervention delivered by Hepp

Report

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Context

Situation

Hepp (Higher Education Progression Partnership) is a jointly funded initiative by Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Sheffield that provides impartial advice and guidance across South Yorkshire and North East Derbyshire. Hepp aims to encourage more children, young people and adults that have experienced personal, systematic, or cultural barriers to accessing higher education to consider it as a viable option. Hepp has identified target groups for activity based on their new strategic approach, these are Mature learners, Disabled Students, Care Experienced, Young Carers and Estranged Students, but also work with key stakeholders in the region that already have existing relationships with these groups.

Mature students are defined within higher education data as undergraduates starting their courses aged 21 or older. The number of mature learners entering higher education has decreased by 38% since 2012 (Hubble & Bolton, 2021). However, there is a significant difference between age groups with those 30 years of age or above having decreased by 50% over the same period (Hubble & Bolton, 2021). The Office for Students (2022) identifies reversing the decline in higher education participation by mature students from underrepresented groups as one of two key priorities relating to improving fair access to higher education. There is also an expectation that all institutions with an access and participation plan will assess their performance in relation to mature students.

Mature students from underrepresented groups are particularly hard to reach, as they are geographically dispersed and may not be even aware that higher education is a possibility for them. Hepp is perfectly positioned as an impartial provider of advice and guidance to support the access of mature students from underrepresented groups as they have existing relationships with external institutions and individuals in the region that could help them access potential students. These existing contacts can be used to share relevant and tailored information with these diverse groups.

Rationale

Hepp's main goal is that its "evidence-based, universal and targeted offers are increasing engagement with HE from anyone in our region with personal, systemic, or cultural barriers to access, as directed by the two universities through the HEPP board". They have identified several key activities to help them reach this goal, of which five are particularly relevant to this intervention.

- 10. More people with barriers in our region are choosing to continue their learning beyond level 4 if it's right for them
- 20. There are effective ways to engage people in our region such that if it's right for them, they choose to continue their learning beyond level 4
- 10. Someone or some entity is doing the effective engaging
- 90. Hepp has reviewed the incidence/Impact rates of groupings of individuals in their geographical region; and the evidence base for intervention and has worked out what generic content will reach the widest number of people and which groupings should be a priority for tailored intervention and receive specific content
- 100. Hepp has used the outcome of 90 and designed evidence-based, universal offers to reach the widest number of people with generic content as possible and tailored offers to reach specific audiences with specific content where the evidence suggested this is most effective and this has been agreed by the two universities

Hepp has also identified that it may be necessary to work with “institutions or individuals who are in positions which directly influence people with barriers” (black text under box 90). As Hepp has limited contact with potential mature students but has strong ties across the region that they could utilise to share information and guidance about higher education. Therefore, it is felt that improving knowledge about higher education across multiple stakeholder groups (train the trainer) will increase knowledge amongst the target population.

Aim

The intervention aims to increase institutions and individuals (stakeholder) awareness and knowledge about higher education so they realise higher education is an option for learners of all ages and can confidently advise prospective students or direct them to relevant sources or organisations for more information.

Underpinning Theory

Evidence

The evidence about mature students highlights the diversity in their backgrounds, motivation to study and structural barriers they experience. Hepp have tried various methods of engaging with mature students including, organised coffee mornings in cafes and attending community events. All direct activity to mature students has been challenging resulting in limited contact with the students directly. An extensive literature review was undertaken to identify barriers mature students experience accessing higher education. It is envisaged that this evidence will be used to inform the resources developed for the intervention. The evidence is presented below as barriers (Appendix 1: Literature review) and what works which is currently very limited.

Barriers

- **Finance:** Mature students are daunted by tuition fees and are more likely to be price sensitive and debt averse. Mature students find accessing financial support and advice complex to navigate and understand. They also experience negativity from employers and often lose money and hours because of their study commitments. There is also a significant impact on the social benefits people can claim, often leading them to leave their studies.
- **Demographics:** Mature students are more likely to fall into one or more other underrepresented groups in higher education. Multiple barriers significantly impact students' ability to access and succeed in higher education and their attitudes towards it. A student's age significantly impacts their experience, especially for older people that may have more caring responsibilities and financial concerns. Mature students and especially those from minoritised backgrounds have often had negative experiences of education and therefore have low levels of trust in educational institutions.
- **Imposter syndrome:** Mature students are apprehensive about fitting into the wider student community, due to age and educational and social background. Their perceived/actual lack of academic skills makes them feel marginalised and vulnerable. The use of language such as 'non-traditional' creates a sense of not belonging.
- **Higher education knowledge:** Mature students lack knowledge about the higher education application process and the different routes available for accessing higher education. They also lack knowledge about the benefits and opportunities of higher education, especially in relation to career changes which is one of the main drivers for mature student participation. There is a lack of understanding about the culture of higher education assuming it will be unsupportive, and staff will be unapproachable.
- **Context:** Mature students often have additional caring and financial responsibilities that can cause challenges. However, a family can also be beneficial as it offers emotional support for students. Location often restricts educational choices as mature students are less mobile so must rely on their local higher education provider to offer the provision they need.

What works

- Go Higher West Yorkshire ran a programme designed to equip key influencers to support care-experienced young people to make informed choices about their educational progression. The programme was found to develop influencers' trust in higher education providers, improved knowledge about higher education options, raised influencers' expectations for care-experienced young people and highlight influencers' advocacy role (Aldridge, 2021).

- A project designed to build the capacity of engineering lecturers to take part in engineering outreach from higher education institutions in the Midlands and East Anglia region, found staff were more likely to take part in outreach activities, summer schools and open days after they had attended the training (Dyke, 2012).
- Ihme et al's (2016) investigation into the effect of emphasising age diversity found that information on an age-diversity friendly environment was valued by mature students in terms of their perception of person-organisation fit. Interestingly, this emphasis had no negative impact on the perceptions of younger students in relation to their own perceived status within the institution, indicating that promotion of age diversity is unlikely to prove off-putting for younger students.

Assumptions

Currently, stakeholders that work with and support potential mature students have limited or outdated knowledge about higher education. This means that they may not understand the opportunities and benefits that could come from higher education for mature students. Therefore, if the knowledge of stakeholders is increased, they are more likely to engage potential mature students in conversations about higher education and refer them to trusted sources for further information and guidance.

Information about higher education, funding, and access routes are complex and confusing for many mature students and they may also lack access to clear and accessible information and guidance about higher education. They may also have limited networks that can provide them with information and guidance about higher education or direct them to appropriate sources of information. Therefore, developing a network of stakeholders that have relevant knowledge about higher education will provide prospective mature students with the access to information and guidance they need.

Outcomes

The outcomes of this intervention are focused on the impact it will have on the stakeholders and their engagement and understanding of higher education. The expected change in stakeholders is envisaged to benefit the target group but establishing the connection between the intervention and mature student access and progression into higher education will not be possible.

Long

In the long-term, stakeholders should be knowledgeable about higher education opportunities for mature students and feel confident that they can aid prospective students to access the information and guidance they need. Crucial to the success of this intervention is the ability of stakeholders to access and use the knowledge gained through the train the trainer resources.

Medium

Medium-term change involves developing trust between stakeholders, higher education providers and Hepp. This trust will help Hepp to develop a community of stakeholders that have access to mature learners and who advocate for higher education. Stakeholders see higher education as a viable option for mature students and encourage them to seek out more information and guidance.

Short

In the short term, the intervention wants to develop stakeholders in four areas, this should be measurable directly after the intervention.

- **Learning:** Knowledge related to higher education and an understanding of options available to mature students.
- **Attitudinal:** Stakeholders begin to have aspirations and expectations of higher education for mature student participation in higher education.
- **Skills-based:** Stakeholders feel equipped to support student choices about higher education.
- **Experiential:** Stakeholders have had an experience of higher education and know where and how to access expertise in higher education.

Programme Delivery

The intervention activities are designed to meet the aims and outcomes and develop stakeholder knowledge and exposure to higher education.

Inputs

The inputs into the intervention fall into two categories: established **Hepp infrastructure** and specific **programme resources** for the intervention. The intervention will draw on existing Hepp staff, partners (HeppSY, TUoS, SHU), student ambassadors, graduate interns, and Outreach HUB/HeppHUB.

Activities

There are three main activities for this intervention that stakeholders will be able to access and engage with.

- **Video programme:** Six short videos that address; finance, support, access routes, UCAS, benefits and myths. These videos will be available to stakeholders for them to use in team meetings and staff development in their organisation.
- **Live session:** Delivered by Hepp staff it will deliver content on finance, support, access routes, UCAS, benefits and myths during a 45-minute live session.

- **Stakeholder engagement:** Hepp will use current meetings and seek out new opportunities to promote resources with stakeholders.

Outputs

The main outputs will include the resources created for the **videos and live sessions**. It is also intended that a **dictionary of stakeholders** will be kept that logs their contact details and engagement with resources. Finally, a **communication strategy** will be produced that identifies potential stakeholders and the process by which to engage, share resources and follow up with them.

References

Please note that the references shown here are those used in the text of the main report. The references used specifically for the literature review can be found in Appendix 1.

Aldridge, N. (2021). *Care to go higher: Equipping key influencers in care-experienced young people*. Go Higher West Yorkshire.

https://www.gohigherwestyorks.ac.uk/impact/?mji_200=16451/care-to-go-higher-evaluation-report

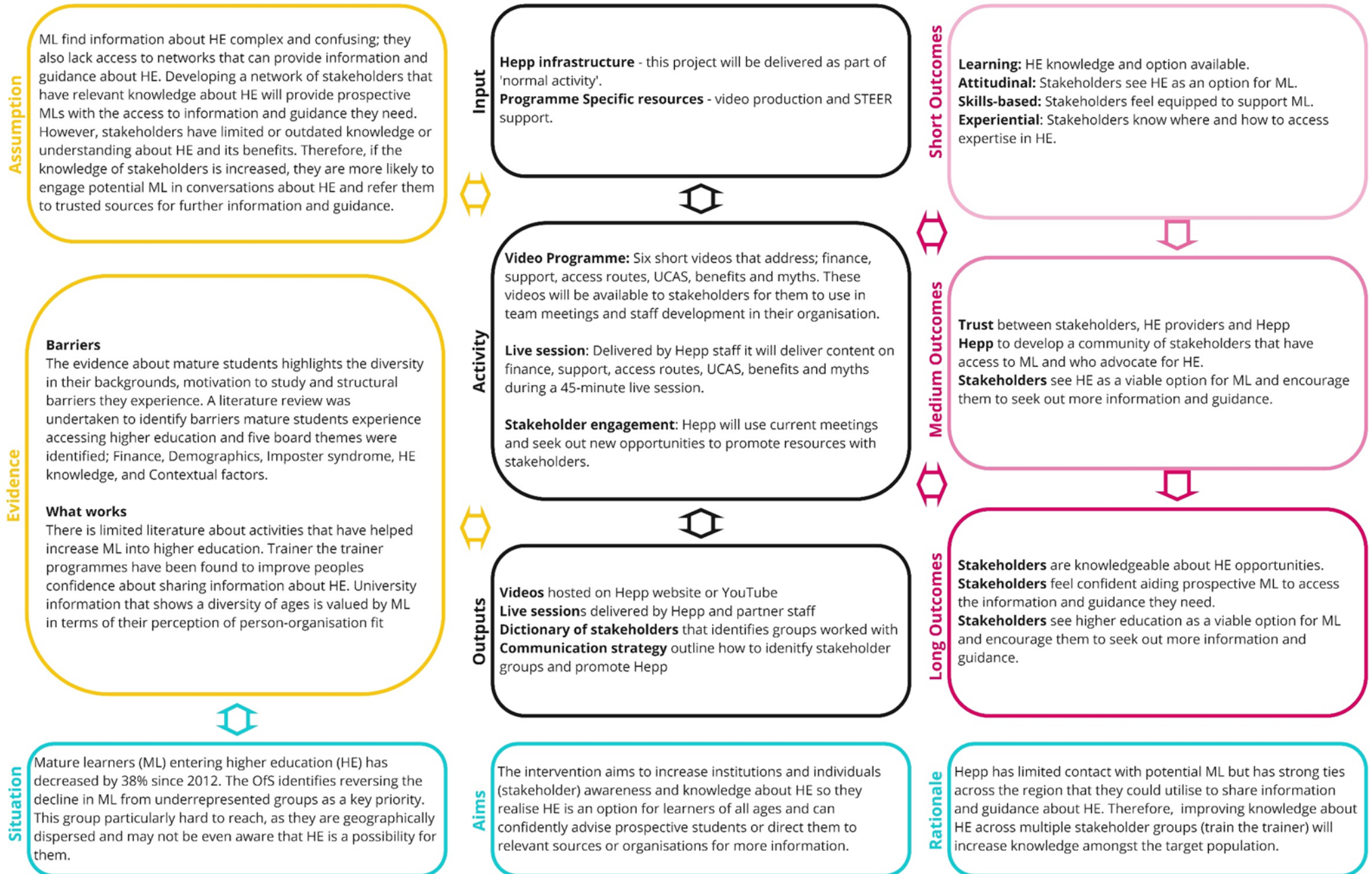
Dyke, D. (2012). Building the capacity of engineering lecturers to take part in engineering outreach from HEIs in the Midlands & East Anglia region. *The Royal Academy of Engineering / National HE STEM Programme*.

Hubble, S. & Bolton, P. (2021). *Part-time undergraduate students in England*. House of Common Library, Briefing Paper No 7966. <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/37543/1/CBP-7966%20%28redacted%29.pdf>

Ihme, T. A., Sonnenberg, K., Barbarino, M. L., Fisseler, B., & Stürmer, S. (2016). How university websites' emphasis on age diversity influences prospective students' perception of person-organization fit and student recruitment. *Research in Higher Education*, 57(8), 1010-1030. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-016-9415-1>

Office for Students (2022, October 6). *Our approach to access and participation*. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/our-approach-to-access-and-participation/>

Mature Learners Train the Trainer



Appendix 1: Literature review

Mature Learner Barriers	Explanation	Key Example(s)	Other Example(s)
<p>Finance</p>	<p>Lack of support from employers regarding part time hours and flexible work.</p> <p>Loss of income due to losing hours/ losing work.</p> <p>Job Seekers Allowance – many mature learners use it to fund studies but are caught in a situation wherein getting a job would cause them to end their studies.</p> <p>Fear that their families would suffer. Taking a loan would be a burden on the student, their partner and offspring.</p> <p>Daunted by the increase in tuition fees (changes since 2012 in fees and student financial support in England).</p> <p>Mature students are more likely to be price sensitive and debt averse than</p>	<p>Busher, H., & James, N. (2019). Struggling to become successful learners: Mature students' early experiences of access to higher education courses. <i>Studies in the Education of Adults</i>, 51(1), 74-88. https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2018.1556483</p> <p>Callender, C., & Thompson, J. (2018). <i>The lost part-timers: The decline of part-time undergraduate higher education in England</i>. The Sutton Trust. https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10066734/1/Claire%20Callender%20The%20Lost%20Part-Timers-%20Final.pdf</p>	<p>Shaw, A. (2014). Examining the potential impact of full tuition fees on mature part-time students in English higher education. <i>Journal of Further and Higher Education</i>, 38(6), 838-850. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877x.2013.778962</p>

	<p>younger students: they often already have mortgages or rental commitments; they need to provide for families and pay bills.</p> <p>Many mature students enter higher education for career change/ progression – if the career benefits of higher education are not fully understood, this acts as a barrier.</p>		
<p>Demographic</p>	<p>Socio-economic - Mature learners are, on average, from poorer backgrounds than traditional age students – this affects both opportunities and attitudes towards higher education and their place within it.</p> <p>Age – older mature learners tend to be more affected by financial restraints and external responsibilities.</p> <p>Gender – women are more likely to be responsible for childcare. Intersects with culture and family.</p> <p>Ethnicity - Higher proportion of mature learners are black compared with traditional age learners – some</p>	<p>Busher, H., & James, N. (2020). Mature students' socio-economic backgrounds and their choices of Access to Higher Education courses. <i>Journal of Further and Higher Education</i>, 44(5), 640-652. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877x.2019.1576857</p> <p>Jenkins, A. (2018). Who Upgrades to Higher Level Qualifications in Midlife?. <i>British Journal of Educational Studies</i>, 66(2), 243-266. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2017.1332335</p>	<p>McVitty, D., & Morris, K. (2012). <i>Never too late to learn. Mature students in higher education.</i> Million+/National Union of Students. https://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/Never_Too_Late_To_Learn_-_FINAL_REPORT.pdf</p>

	<p>evidence that black mature learners are less likely to place trust in higher education institutions than other demographics.</p>		
<p>Imposter Syndrome</p>	<p>Apprehension surrounding fitting into the wider student community due to age, educational and social backgrounds.</p> <p>Fear of being outshone by younger students.</p> <p>Importance of language – e.g., ‘non-traditional’ creates a deficit-model.</p> <p>Identity – need for mature students to identify as learners.</p> <p>Importance of peer-networks.</p> <p>Confidence in ability due to time out from education. There is a need to adapt to a new and unfamiliar way of learning.</p>	<p>Turton, D. (2018). You Still Can: Recruiting mature students into higher education. <i>Journal of Education Advancement & Marketing</i>, 3(3), 229-240.</p> <p>Wall, J. (2015). <i>Mature student engagement: How mature students’ perceptions of other impacts engagement in higher education</i>. http://jeffwall.me.uk/uploads/7/2/2/4/72242483/final_year_dissertation_project_-_mature_student_engagement.pdf</p>	<p>Howard, C., & Davies, P. (2013). Attracting mature students into higher education: The impact of approaches to learning and social identity. <i>Journal of Further and Higher Education</i>, 37(6), 769-785. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877x.2012.684038</p> <p>Tett, L., Hounsell, J., Christie, H., Cree, V. E., & McCune, V. (2012). Learning from feedback? Mature students’ experiences of assessment in higher education. <i>Research in Post-Compulsory Education</i>, 17(2), 247-260. https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2011.627174</p> <p>Chapman, A. (2017). Using the assessment process to overcome Imposter Syndrome in mature</p>

			<p>students. <i>Journal of Further and Higher Education</i>, 41(2), 112-119. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877x.2015.1062851</p> <p>Saddler, Y., & Sundin, E. C. (2020). Mature students' journey into higher education in the UK: an interpretative phenomenological analysis. <i>Higher Education Research & Development</i>, 39(2), 332-345. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1672624</p>
External Factors	<p>Childcare - Family commitments impacting on time dedicated to learning/studying. The cost of childcare.</p> <p>Family Support – of particular significance to mature learners due to employment and childcare responsibilities. Lack of family support is therefore a significant barrier for some students.</p> <p>Location – mature learners are more likely to stay local than traditional age</p>	<p>Busher, H., & James, N. (2019). Struggling to become successful learners: Mature students' early experiences of access to higher education courses. <i>Studies in the Education of Adults</i>, 51(1), 74-88. https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2018.1556483</p> <p>Skillen, S. (2019). A mature student experience photo elicitation study: Multiple</p>	<p>McVitty, D., & Morris, K. (2012). <i>Never too late to learn. Mature students in higher education</i>. Million+ and National Union of Students. https://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/Never_Too_Late_To_Learn_-_FINAL_REPORT.pdf</p> <p>Gail Thomas, B., & Hanson, J. (2014). Developing social integration to enhance student retention and success in higher</p>

	<p>students due to a combination of family and employment responsibilities. Therefore, a major barrier is a lack of local higher education providers, especially if mature learners are seeking specific courses.</p> <p>Mature learners are more likely to have additional barriers such as disabilities and care experience.</p> <p>Many mature learners are slower at adapting to new technology, and this holds them back in learning or wanting to study.</p> <p>Initial experiences of education - Adults who have not had previous successes in education are not likely to continue or return to education.</p>	<p>responsibilities, study and wellbeing. <i>Journal of Applied Psychology and Social Science</i>, 5(1), 51-85.</p>	<p>education: the GROW@ BU initiative. <i>Widening participation and lifelong learning</i>, 16(3), 58-70. https://doi.org/10.5456/wpll.16.3.58</p> <p>- Butcher, J. (2020). <i>Unheard: The voices of part-time adult learners</i>. Higher Education Policy Institute. https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Unheard-The-voices-of-part-time-adult-learners.pdf</p> <p>Office for Students. (2020, July 27). <i>Mature students</i>. https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/effective-practice/mature-students/</p>
<p>Trust/ Understanding</p>	<p>Lack of trust in the education system due to prior learning experiences. A higher proportion of mature learners leave school with few/no qualifications than traditional age students.</p>	<p>Farini, F., & Scollan, A. M. (2021). A hope to trust. Educational leadership to support mature students' inclusion in higher education: an experience from Surrey, England. <i>International Journal of Leadership in</i></p>	<p>Turton, D. (2018). You Still Can: Recruiting mature students into higher education. <i>Journal of Education Advancement & Marketing</i>, 3(3), 229-240.</p>

	<p>Students' academic skills aren't sufficient to meet course demands. Mature learners are tested by unfamiliar academic practices making them feel vulnerable and marginalised.</p> <p>Perception of higher education tutors as unapproachable – big contrast with Access Courses tutors where many mature learners transition back into education.</p> <p>Lack of knowledge regarding application processes – importance of instilling a sense of urgency.</p> <p>The complex navigation required to access financial support and financial advice can influence decision-making by module leaders (eligibility and tuition fees).</p> <p>The information available about the different opportunities or routes into higher education needs to be clearer for mature learners.</p>	<p><i>Education</i>, 24(5), 717-742. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2019.1657592</p>	<p>Breeze, M., Johnson, K., & Uytman, C. (2018). What (and who) works in widening participation? Supporting direct entrant student transitions to higher education. <i>Teaching in Higher Education</i>, 0(0), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2018.1536042</p>
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