

Understanding the Pedagogical and Experiential Needs of Mature Learners

BRIDGEMAN, Nikita-Marie and WINFIELD, Joanne

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/37634/>

This document is the Presentation

Citation:

BRIDGEMAN, Nikita-Marie and WINFIELD, Joanne (2026). Understanding the Pedagogical and Experiential Needs of Mature Learners. In: AdvanceHE Teaching and Learning Conference 2026, University of Sheffield, 30 Jun - 02 Jul 2026. AdvanceHE. (Unpublished) [Conference or Workshop Item]

Copyright and re-use policy

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

Understanding the Pedagogical and Experiential Needs of Mature Learners

Jo Winfield: Associate Head - Learning, Teaching and Assessment

Nikita Bridgeman: Senior Lecturer

Mature Learners

It is well understood that both the learning and broader university experiences of mature students differ from students, often undergraduates, that join us at a younger age (Goeman & Deschact, 2025).

Despite this, there is a lack of clarity in sector-wide data regarding mature student participation.

Consequently, further work is needed to understand how we can support mature learners to become full participants in mainstream higher education (Qerimi, 2025).



Data Tensions and Sector Challenges

Inconclusive Sector Data

When trying to build a picture of the current mature learner landscape across HE it became clear that the data available is not only limited and vague, but often contradictory:

- UCAS reports suggest a decline in mature undergraduate entrants (UCAS, 2024).
- In some reports HESA statistics indicate growth in mature enrolments across certain modes and levels of study, especially for learners aged 30+ (HESA, 2025), though others suggest a sharp decline in mature learner numbers.

Declining Enrolments

Overall enrolments at UK universities continue to decrease, with challenges seen due to:

1. International recruitment decline (Times Higher Education, 2025).
2. Applications from UK students falling, down to 41.3% in the 2024-2025 cycle (HESA, 2025).
3. Intensifying competition between universities, with higher-tariff universities making more offers (Times Higher Education, 2025).

Could mature students be the answer? Not without rethinking strategy and policies such as Lifelong Learning Entitlement (Kernohan, 2026).

Our Research

- The aim of our study was to explore the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of mature learners in relation to pedagogy and student experience.
- We used the Listening Rooms method (Parkin & Heron, 2022), followed by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
- 10 participants were recruited via Business School wide emails, resulting in the completion of 5 Listening Rooms.

Participants

- Mature learners aged 25+
- Enrolled at Sheffield Business School
- Undergraduate and Postgraduate
- Home and International

Listening Rooms

- Developed by Parkin & Heron (2022), the Listening Rooms method involves guided participant conversation without the presence of a researcher.
- Participants have a 1 hour conversation shaped by 6 prompts.
- The research team is not present to allow for uninterrupted conversation between participants.
- This approach creates a reflective, peer-to-peer space that encourages authentic dialogue; providing insights that are rarely accessible outside of peer-to-peer discussion.



Key Findings

Connection

- Being surrounded by the right people
- Social activities
- Learning about cultural differences
- Making friends

P5: "...having a good set of people around you. A good set of friends and course mates. People that are engaged...and have the same values"

P6: "...it helps having that personal connection with your lecturers and your tutors, because they all know you as a person"

Feeling welcome

- Being a part of the university
- Embracing individual differences
- Flexibility

P2: "Sheffield Hallam was the only university that reached out to me saying I was welcome" (following anti-immigration marches in the UK)

P10: "I think flexibility also makes me happy in the uni, whereby I can always have flexible hours to work and then also to study"

Practical skills development

- Hands on learning
- Focus on soft skills
- Opportunities to try new things

P6: "I think lecturers are obviously good at pushing you to get out of your comfort zone"

P7: "We did some different modules and I learnt loads...this is something I've never got to dip my toe in before and never got to experience"

Implications for Practice

Mature learners thrive when pedagogy is relational, welcoming, and practical. This points to three priority areas for practice:

- **Connection** — Build intentional community through peer networks, culturally responsive activities, and social opportunities that help mature learners feel surrounded by “the right people.”
- **Welcoming Environment** — Strengthen belonging with flexible learning options, inclusive teaching materials, and tailored onboarding that recognises diverse life experiences.
- **Practical Skills Development** — Prioritise hands-on learning, embed soft-skills development, and create low-stakes opportunities to try new tools and approaches.

How can we achieve this? Co-design with mature learners, adopt an asset-based approach, and integrate academic, social, and wellbeing support.

Our Next Steps



**Workshop at the SHU SoTL
Conference**

During the workshop attendees will be encouraged to:

- Consider what comes to mind when they think of mature learners and challenge assumptions.
- Explore the research themes from the perspective of their individual practice.
- Collaboratively design interventions suitable for their own contexts.

Key Takeaways

1. Feeling **connected** to others is one of the most important things to mature learners; whether this is with their peers, university staff, or the university itself.
2. Having their **differences embraced** and supported is crucial to the overall experience.
3. **Hands on, practical learning** experiences, both inside and outside of the classroom are preferred.



Thank you for listening!

Any questions?

If you would like to discuss the content of this presentation further, please email Nikita at n.bridgeman@shu.ac.uk

References

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Goeman, K., & Deschacht, N. (2019). The learning strategies of mature students: a study of social science students in Belgium. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, 11(4), 814-827.
- HESA. (2025). *Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2023/24*. HESA. Retrieved from <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/20-03-2025/sb271-higher-education-student-statistics>
- Kernohan, D. (2026, June 8). *The big shortfall: Demographic downturn and the post-18 education system*. The Post-18 Project. <https://post18.co.uk/big-shortfall-demography/>
- Parkin, H., & Heron, E. (2022). Innovative methods for positive institutional change: The Listening Rooms Project and student and staff 'voice'. *Educational Developments*, 23(3), 13-17.
- Qerimi, H. (2025). *Innovative Teaching Methods in Higher Education: Empowering Mature Non-Traditional Learners*.
- Times Higher Education. (2025). *Leading UK universities making 'noticeably more' offers to students*. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/leading-uk-universities-making-noticeably-more-offers-students>
- UCAS. (2024). *UCAS releases undergraduate end of cycle data 2024*. UCAS. Retrieved from <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/ucas-releases-undergraduate-end-cycle-data-2024>