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# Navigating the first year at an English university: exploring the experiences of mature students through the lens of transition theory

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## ABSTRACT

Previous research has revealed how mature students are more likely to drop out of university education, achieve poorer degree outcomes and have greater family, financial, caring and work commitments to contend with than their younger peers. In response to calls for further empirical work on mature students' university experiences and informed theoretically by Transition Theory, the primary study aim was to explore the day-to-day encounters of 12 newly enrolled undergraduate mature students as they completed their first year of study at an English university in a post pandemic era. Supportive with previous research, participants were found to be academically but not socially and emotionally engaged. Having placed significant time and effort into their studies and achieved relative academic success, their expectations of university life were only partly met with most encountering a socially, emotionally and financially challenging first year. Practical implications for developing increasingly flexible and relational rich modes of educational provision that best address and support the needs, abilities, motivations, and expectations of mature students as they complete their university studies in a digital world are provided, as are future research avenues and limitations.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

The value that higher education (HE) can provide in supporting personal development, life satisfaction and future prosperity is globally accepted (O'shea et al., 2018). Across the international HE sector, widening participation (WP) has become a well-established strategy for addressing inequality of access for underrepresented student groups and providing opportunity for all to learn (Campbell & McKendrick, 2017). This agenda has accomplished relative success in the United Kingdom (UK) over recent decades, evidenced by the steady percentage growth of the population from non-traditional and disadvantaged backgrounds to have completed an undergraduate degree (Venegas-Muggli, 2020). This is especially the case for mature students, defined as those aged 21 years or older upon entering university after a period of time away from full-time education (Office for Students, 2021; UCAS, 2023). With a university education viewed as a catalyst for positive life change and social mobility (Christensen & Craft, 2021; Shanahan, 2000), mature student numbers entering HE have increased steadily over recent years (Gale & Parker, 2014; Heagney & Benson, 2017). In 2018 for example, 1.3% of the UK population aged 25 years and older were studying an

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undergraduate or higher qualification, marginally less than the United States of America (2.1%) and Australia (3.8%) (Office for Students, 2021).

The influential work of Dianne Reay has revealed how mature aged university students from working class and lesser privileged backgrounds often operate under extreme financial pressures (Crozier et al., 2008) and are more likely to encounter discrimination, disruption and a degree of social exclusion (Reay, 2018; Reay et al., 2010). This is especially the case for those who enter from families who have not previously attended university and may be lesser equipped to master the dominant cultural codes and practices in HE, which ‘traditional’ students may have readily obtained through their prior social, cultural and educational experience (Chung et al., 2017; Reay, 2002). These findings can be explained by Bourdieu’s notable works in the sociology of education and his concerns with social class and social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Bourdieu suggests education systems assume that learners are in possession of cultural capital, which for mature students from lower social class backgrounds or families where there has been no previous experience of university education, may be lacking. This often means that students from such backgrounds are disadvantaged (Sullivan, 2001), believing that they lack the behaviours, skills or ways of interacting necessary for university success (Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021).

### Mature student expectations of HE

Research has consistently revealed how the expectations of newly arrived HE learners do not always match their actual experiences (Hayman, Allin & Coyles, 2017) and that many find adjusting to university life as being a particularly challenging period of their lives (Turner et al., 2017). The mature student undergraduate university experience can often though be very different to that of their younger aged counterparts (Christensen et al., 2017; Rubin, 2012; Smith & Naylor, 2001) with many finding the integrating into HE settings and overcoming of social, academic and financial barriers to be more challenging (Drury et al., 2008; Mallman & Lee, 2017; McCune et al., 2010) and their learning more likely to be disrupted by family and caring responsibilities, work commitments and a low confidence to succeed academically (Christensen et al., 2017; Clayton et al., 2009; de Greef et al., 2015; Homer, 2022; Steele et al., 2005; Thomas, 2015). Studies further demonstrate how mature students are more likely than younger peers to commute daily onto campus instead of living in university accommodation (Holton, 2018; Pokorny et al., 2017), often arrive lacking in the necessary understanding of what HE level learning fully entails (Drury et al., 2008; Kenny et al., 2011), as well as feeling underprepared for the teaching and assessment methods they are likely to face (Christensen et al., 2017; Fleming & McKee, 2005; O’Brien et al., 2009).

Although mature students generally display higher levels of motivation towards completing their studies (Baxter & Britton, 2001; Christensen & Craft, 2021; McCune et al., 2010; Spiers, 2021) and attaining higher levels of academic achievement than lesser aged peers (Hoskins et al., 1997), they often describe feeling unsupported by academic and service staff and that their expectations of university life were only partially met (Baxter & Britton, 2001; Christensen et al., 2017; Drury et al., 2008; Read et al., 2003). More recent evidence shows how they are more likely to disengage, underachieve and ultimately withdraw from their studies than students aged under 21 years. For example, the 2017–18 continuation rate for mature students on full-time or apprenticeship courses in the United Kingdom was lower than that of younger aged students (84.0% and 92.1% respectively (UK Universities, 2018).

Research has also found how mature undergraduate students prefer learning with peers with comparable life and work experiences and who are similar to themselves in age and ambition (Anderson & Thorpe, 2008; Homer, 2022; Shanahan, 2000), that they rely heavily on close family members and friends during their studies for emotional and financial support (Mallman & Lee, 2017; Reay, 2002) are generally unaware of institutional support services that exist to support their overall learning experience (Heagney & Benson, 2017) and that friendships are more likely to consist of established networks from outside of their academic studies (Gallacher et al., 2002; Reay, 2003).

## Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework used to contextualise the study findings is based on ‘Transition Theory’, using specific aspects of The Model of Human Adaptation to Transition (Schlossberg, 1981). Schlossberg (1981) defined a transition as an event or non-event resulting in a change of assumptions about oneself, a change in routines, roles, and the situation you find yourself in and requires a corresponding change in behaviour and relationships. Within the context of this study, a transition would characterise a period of change for a ‘mature’ student which results in a new set of demands, stresses, and situations for them to manage, which may or may not require the individual to alter their behaviour subject to a specific ‘event’, ‘circumstance’ or ‘situation’. Mature students face several types of change throughout their transition to HE, with all having varying degrees of impact. For example, some may be perceived as positive, and others as negative which could result in radical restructuring of an individual’s self-identity and their particular circumstances and coping strategies.

Coping with transitions involves a process of moving in, moving through, and moving out of transitions, and an individual’s ability to cope or move through the transition depends on a unique mixture of resources, both assets and liabilities that are available to that person (Anderson & Goodman, 2014). Schlossberg’s model details how individuals adapt to transitions and is based on four specific factors: situation, self, support, and strategies, known as the 4 S’s (Schlossberg et al., 1995). A key aspect of this theory is the centrality of self-perception, meaning that a transition is only afforded importance and significance if the individual experiencing it perceives it to be so, hence not every individual will react to the same transition in the same way. Furthermore, the coping mechanisms for the transitions can be entirely different on the persons perceptions of the event and the resources and support available to them.

## Organisational context

This study was undertaken at an English HE provider formed in 1969 and granted university status in 1992 (hereafter referred to as RLH). Its origins are rooted in the need to provide high-quality vocational education, and this remains a core feature of the institutions current provision. RLH is nationally renowned for teaching excellence and ensuring fair access is a key objective, underlined in its 2020-21- 2024-25 Access and Participation Plan. In recent research by SunLife (2023), RLH was ranked in the top ten UK universities for the number of undergraduates aged 50 years or older. Over recent academic years, mature students at RLH were marginally less likely than younger students (e.g. aged under 21 years on entry) to complete their studies (Table 1) and graduate with good honours (e.g. 2:1 degree classification or above) (Table 2).

**Table 1.** Retention – mature v young.

Status	2017–2018 Retention	2018–2019 Retention	2019–2020 Retention	Average
Mature	88.8%	88.1%	87.0%	87.96%
Young	89.8%	88.4%	88.7%	89.00%
Difference	1.0%	0.3%	1.7%	

**Table 2.** Good honours – mature v young.

Status	2017–2018 Good Honours	2018–2019 Good Honours	2019–2020 Good Honours	Average Good Honours
Mature	69.2%	70.8%	75.8%	71.93%
Young	81.7%	83.6%	86.4%	83.90%
Difference	12.5%	12.8%	10.6%	

## Study aim

Existing research that has examined mature students' experiences of entering and then progressing through university has been informed theoretically by the work of Bourdieu (e.g. Reay, 2002, 2003) and more recently by Relational Dialectics Theory (O'Boyle, 2014), The Community of Inquiry Model (Homer, 2022) and The Ideal Student Concept (Gregerson & Nielson, 2023). Although Transition Theory has been widely accepted and recognised within research investigating elite sporting contexts (Flowers et al., 2014; Swain, 1991), it had yet been used to explain the experiences of mature students as they transition into and through their university education. This is despite several striking parallels that an athlete faces during their performance career with those of a mature student taking that first step into HE. Therefore, the aim of this study was to capture the first-year university experiences of newly enrolled undergraduate mature students through the guiding theoretical framework of Schlosberg's Transition Theory (1981).

## Methodology

### Participants

In this study, a mature student was defined as being aged 21 years or above on entry into their studies. During late September 2021, all newly arrived first year foundation and undergraduate degree mature students at RLH were invited to participate in the study. Once ethical institutional clearance was granted, a recruitment email outlining the study aims, inclusion criteria and procedures to follow were communicated across the wider university student population through emails sent to their personal university accounts by Faculty Directors for Access and Participation. This explained how the research team were wishing to recruit and then interview participants who were aged 21 years or older and happy to share insights into their learning journeys as first year mature students at RLH. A self-selecting recruitment approach resulted in 12 eligible full-time first year students agreeing to become participants (6 male and 6 female: overall mean age = 30.1 years).

Seven participants were the first from their immediate family setting to enter HE. Nine had previously completed a BTec qualification<sup>1</sup> and three entered having completed A-levels<sup>1</sup> either at an adult learning centre or further education college. Nine self-identified as white British, two as British Asian and one as white European. Eleven resided either at their own home address or with parents and commuted daily onto campus for face-to-face teaching. One lived in university halls of residence accommodation. Ten participants were enrolled as first year undergraduates across academic programmes, including Law ( $N=3$ ), History and Politics ( $N=2$ ), English Literature and Creative Writing ( $N=2$ ), Psychology ( $N=1$ ), Sports Science ( $N=1$ ) and Business Management ( $N=1$ ), with the remaining two enrolled on year-long foundation degrees in Sport Development and Management ( $N=1$ ) and Music ( $N=1$ ). Four participants reported having a specific learning disability, including dyslexia ( $N=1$ ), post-traumatic stress disorder ( $N=1$ ), autism ( $N=1$ ) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder ( $N=1$ ). All 12 participants were attending their preferred first choice destination of study, citing geographical location, reputation, and convenience as key drivers. Four participants were parents. One had two children aged under 12 and three each had one child aged 6, 7 and 9 respectively. All consenting participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect anonymity and were free to withdraw from the study at any time.

## Design and procedure

### *Semi-structured qualitative interviews*

The study design provided opportunity for students to be engaged as partners and work alongside the research team at all stages of the study. In June 2021, two female mature students were recruited

and trained as student researchers to conduct online semi-structured interviews with participants. An informal two-hour online training session led by the first author took place with both students in July 2021, providing additional support and further defining their roles and boundaries within the study. Student researcher one was a female 27-year-old full-time second year undergraduate studying law. Student researcher two was a female 24-year-old full-time postgraduate studying English Literature.

Each participant completed three separate online semi-structured interviews to establish a 'picture' of their transitional experiences. Questions were framed around Schlossberg's Transition Theory and phases of transition (i.e. moving in, moving through, and moving out). The first round of interviews took place during mid November 2021 and linked to the phase of 'moving in', the second during late February 2022 was linked to 'moving through' and the third in May 2022 was linked to 'moving out'. All interviews took place online using Microsoft Teams, lasted between 18–35 minutes, and was undertaken by one of the student researchers at convenient times for each participant. At each interview, participants were encouraged to discuss their university experience thus far. Interview one (moving in) gauged how participants had initially settled at RLH, both academically and socially, and to what extent had their expectations been met. Interview two (moving through) probed these expectations further as well as discussing any barriers faced and the resultant impact on their motivation. Interview three (moving out) enabled participants a final opportunity to discuss all aspects of their first year at university, including academic performance, challenges they had to overcome, social integration, lessons learned and next steps for their transition into year two of study. Topics discussed included university induction, feelings of belonging and engagement with peers and academic staff, general self-confidence, integration into university social life, academic performance and issues and barriers faced. Copies of the three interview schedules are available on request from the first author.

It is important when undertaking qualitative interviews for the interviewer to quickly build trust and rapport with consenting interviewees, so that they feel reassured and relaxed to freely discuss appropriate topics (Patton, 2002). Student researchers took the role of 'active listeners' during interviews which were terminated once they were satisfied that theoretical saturation to all questions posed has been achieved. Questions were open ended and supplemented by probes when necessary to draw greater depth and meaning from responses (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This enabled the direction of interviews to be guided by participants, rather than dictated by the schedule, and made it possible to follow up any additional information discussed (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Example questions from each of the three interviews (1 = interview 1; 2 = interview 2 and 3 = interview 3) included 'how have you been finding life at university' (1), 'do your experiences of university thus far match your expectations' (1), 'since we last met in November, how have you been finding life at university' (2), 'discuss any specific challenges you have faced since enrolling at university' (2), 'how well has the university supported you as a mature student to integrate into university life' (3) and 'if you were to start university again, what would you do differently and why' (3). This flexible questioning approach supported participant centeredness, making it possible to follow up conversations where appropriate (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## Data analysis

Following guidelines published by Braun and Clarke (2021), each interview was recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed through reflexive thematic analysis. In the first data analysis phase (data familiarisation and writing notes), each transcript was read multiple times by the first and second authors, with notes reflecting theme statements and their meanings placed within margins (Patton, 2002). The next stage involved the same authors independently annotating each interview transcript with their initial interpretations of the data. Thematic coding employed a deductive approach, which is recommended for qualitative analysis when existing theories are being tested (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Once complete, direct quotes representing each theme were

selected. The final stage involved developing written accounts from identified themes which were reviewed and redrafted several times by both first and second authors. The second author also acted as a critical friend to the first author during the latter analysis stages by challenging initial data interpretations through critical feedback.

To inform the study findings, all four phases of Schlossberg's framework were analysed with specific reference to the 4 S's - **situation**, **self**, **support** and **strategies**. The definitions in Table 3 were devised through analysis of research by Goodman et al. (2006), Sueningrum et al. (2022), Pellegrino and Hoggan (2015) and Karmelita (2018).

## Trustworthiness and credibility

Six weeks post-interview, participants undertook a brief member checking conversation over Microsoft Teams with one of the student researchers to establish that they were satisfied that the proposed findings were accurate reflections of their first-year experiences. This process reduced ambiguity, increased response validity and enabled participants to add things they may have forgot to initially mention (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## Results

Study findings are presented and categorised according to Schlossberg's 4S's, as identified in Table 3, and reflect the participants experiences.

### Situation and self

All participants were studying at university to improve their future employment prospects, placing high demands on themselves to succeed academically and with only limited interest in the wider social aspects of student life. It was clear how they had a different 'mind-set' towards their identity as university students than younger classmates. This is highlighted by the following participant quotes which discuss their reasonings for being at university:

*I am a mature student and I know why I am there. I am not necessarily here for the social experience. It is a great thing if you get along with people but that is not my main goal. (Duncan)*

*I have poor relationships with other students. I am not that bothered about it if I am not invited for a night out because I would not go anyway. I am here strictly for studying. (Sally)*

Whilst the decision to attend university in every case was self-determined, their consequent transition into day-to-day academic life was described by several as being especially financially

**Table 3.** Assigned definition of the 4S's.

4 S's	Definition
Situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the context (environment) in which the student faces the transition</li> <li>the timing and duration of the transition</li> <li>what control the student had over the transition</li> <li>what triggers influenced the transition</li> <li>significant events/stress associated with the transition</li> </ul>
Self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>how the transition affected the student with regards to their own demographic characteristics, e.g. personal circumstances, single parent/carer</li> <li>how the transition altered the student's daily life, i.e. the impact it was having, e.g. time on and off campus</li> <li>how the student responded to the transition - including psychosocial interactions and stress created for the student</li> </ul>
Support Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the perception of the transition</li> <li>from family, friends, peers, university support strategies and external sources/resources</li> <li>what coping mechanisms and support structures were/should be put in place in response to particular transitions</li> </ul>



and emotionally demanding. In doing so, they discussed their difficulties in trying to simultaneously manage their multiple home life, employment and caring responsibilities with the time and effort required to successfully undertake high-quality university level study. The below comments highlight these challenges further:

*Initially it was tough because of mixing study with my sports training and also work and I was finding it very hard as a single parent to find a bit of a balance and there were weeks when I burnt out a bit because I was doing a lot. (Neil)*

*It has been really scary. I cannot switch off. I am coming home and doing things with the kids. I am taking them to whatever things they are going to, and so, I have to really organise when I am studying. So, I am taking Andre to his ju jitsu class, then I have got 45 mins, so I will do a reading in that time. I have to map out my day, and it is a heck of a lot of work. It is testing on me. I have never had to do that before. It is really testing my organisational skills. (Sarah)*

*The younger students just do not realise how much effort it takes at our age, especially when you have kids and you have a full-time job, to also go to full-time uni study. I do not think they respect this, so when they talk to me I just feel that they do not respect me at all and they do not involve me. (Sally)*

*Adjusting from a work mindset into more of an academic school mindset is still taking some time. (Liam)*

A limited sense of belonging and connection to peers, academics and the wider university community was also raised on multiple occasions. Several participants discussed feeling particularly socially isolated during their first year at university, reporting a lack of integration opportunities and resultant challenges in then establishing relationships with fellow learners, and occasionally academic staff. For example, Kelly said:

*'I stand out like a sore thumb because I am older than the lecturers and people just look at you and think, oh, they are too old, type of thing, what are they doing here. I am not getting involved with them'.*

David and Michelle respectively stated:

*'there is such a big gap between me and the other students age wise' and 'there is no connection with me to anything. I turn up, I do my thing, I go to the library and do my own thing'.*

Duncan discussed similar challenges that they had encountered by saying:

*'I have no links with students. It is a little bit weird because I have got more in common with the lecturers that I do with the people in my class'.*

Natalie also stated:

*'I do not really feel like a member of the university. I just sort of feel like I am going there, doing a task, and coming home. I think university is just geared towards the younger group, and I felt a bit left out because everyone else was doing things'.*

Some participants explained having no free time due to work and family commitments to engage with out of class socialising opportunities, including societies or sports clubs events, which may have provided greater opportunities for them to build stronger and more compatible social relationships with younger peers. The below quotes demonstrate this way of thinking further:

*I do not know if it is sort of imposter syndrome a little bit but I kind of feel a little bit alienated sometimes, like I do not belong. (Kelly)*

*A lot of things socially they (the young students) find really easy, but I am m still learning. It is hard not to judge yourself, like I am rubbish, why am I here. (Sarah)*

*I have not got involved socially in any of the societies or anything like that. I kind of feel like it would be a bit weird. (Liam)*

Several found it difficult talking to and establishing compatible relationships with classmates who younger in age and life experience. They considered their in-class behaviour to be the most negative



aspect of their studies, particularly disliking how they did not always attend and then engage fully, as they did, within individual and class-based group activities, especially those relating to summative assessments. For example, Melanie stated *'because I am noticeably older than the rest of my classmates, they just do not want to talk to me or bother with me'*.

Sally emphasised this disconnect when explaining how they had significantly different motivations and views as to why they were attending university than their peers *'they (younger students) do not really understand my problem, that I have to put in all my annual leave at work just to be able to go to uni. I do not have a day off or a time when I can be off because every day when I am not at work, I am at uni or need to study, so I limit all interactions with people at uni who are unnecessary'*. Others discussed finding many of their peers to be lacking in maturity, ambition and work ethic. For example, Neil stated *'a lot of mature students probably find the younger students a little bit too immature. I mean, the group chat, when you read some of the stuff it is like, are you sure you should be at university. I was doing that when I was twelve'*.

### Support and strategies

Participants were highly complementary about the academic support they had received from their academic staff at every stage of their first year in HE. The important role that they played with the grasping of basic independent learning skills, including paraphrasing, referencing and critical thinking, was very well received, as was the providing of information about the role of the personal tutor and guidance on how to access and use the student portal, electronic library, and study skill support mechanisms. The below quotes highlight this positive impact this more specifically:

*Staff have been so helpful when I have needed it and they always reply quickly to emails.* (Kirsty)

*My personal tutor has been absolutely fantastic. Any problem I have had, then within 5 minutes, he has got back to me. He always makes me feel like no matter how small my problems are, they matter to him, and that he wants to help me to sort them out. That has helped me tremendously.* (Duncan)

*I feel they (academic staff) understand when I tell them that I am juggling between full-time university and a full-time job and it's been quite hard, so they can relate to that and they are really trying to help me succeed.* (Sally)

Whilst academic staff were praised for their high-quality educational practices, many did not know where to advise or who to contact to get assistance for non-academic issues. As such, participants were mostly unaware of the available financial and pastoral support services that the university provided, particularly those specific to assisting mature students. For example, Kelly said *'I did not even know what there is available for mature students to be honest'*. Those participants that did manage to engage with the available support generally spoke negatively about the quality of services provided and their consequent experiences. Kirsty stated *'the support services take days to get back in touch and you could not get a direct line number to contact them'*. Most complaints were related to financial issues, with several discussing the many challenges that they had encountered and the consequent impact it had upon their day-to-day functioning and well-being. The following quote by Kelly highlights the important need for more directed and easily accessible support for mature students so that they can resolve financial issues as soon as possible *'so, I have lost all my student finance and it has taken weeks to be able to speak to a welfare officer and talk through my options. I would say, since September, it has just been a nightmare. It has been so stressful'*.

Participants also described feeling that their university induction events were heavily focussed towards younger peers who were less likely to have external responsibilities and commitments (e.g. young children), and whilst effective in supporting academic integration and confidence to achieve in their studies, felt they did not sufficiently help them to settle quickly, feel included and confident enough to form new friendships and networks with peers. For example, Kelly said *'we get forgotten about. It would be nice to have an induction just for mature students'*. Several suggested how a 'mature student support group', may help to overcome some of the initial social integration

concerns, like Natalie who said ‘even if it is just someone to sit and have a coffee with because sometimes it is quite isolating’ and Liam who stated ‘if you struggle with anything, we might feel more comfortable to talk to each other, than asking eighteen year olds, who might be different or their reaction might be different and may not understand our struggles or our questions’.

Participants spoke openly about the difficulties they faced in making early morning and late afternoon teaching time slots because of childcare and work commitments. They explained further how the scheduling of face-to-face classes on most days and with large time gaps in-between caused additional financial pressures (e.g. increased travel costs) and impacted negatively on their family, work, and study life balance. Waiting around between sessions, often alone and for several hours at a time and limited online learning options were particular frustrations for many, as reflected in the following quotes:

*I was hoping that the university would have more online options for those that have responsibilities. Everything back face-to-face is just not doable for everyone, especially us that have got childcare. Not all nurseries are open till 7pm. (Kelly)*

*I hate the free periods in-between classes. I would rather they were back-to-back and then I can go home and just focus. (Jack)*

*It is just such a waste of time for me to have 4 hours in between classes. There is no point going home, so I am stuck at uni all day and I do not know anyone. (Neil)*

*I prefer online learning because I am a mature student with a full-time job. It just gives me more flexibility’. (Sally)*

## Discussion

Successful transition into university is reflective of newly arrived students feeling they have settled promptly and happily into their course and wider university community, made new friends and networks, have developed a sense of belonging and identity with peers and academic staff and are motivated to learn (Thompson et al., 2021). By drawing on Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1981), this study examined the transitions encountered by newly enrolled undergraduate mature students as they completed their first year of university study. The key findings to surface are mostly already recorded in the literature and include challenges with arranging and meeting the financial cost of childcare (Bowl, 2001; Drury et al., 2008), finding the time to study around existing work, family and caring commitments (Bowl, 2001; de Greef et al., 2015; Homer, 2022; Steele et al., 2005; Thomas, 2015), difficulties faced in forming friendships with peers in formal academic settings (Mallman & Lee, 2017), not feeling part of a wider student community (McCune et al., 2010) and lacking in awareness of how to access the financial and pastoral support services that institutions provide (Heagney & Benson, 2017). Within the context of Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1981), most participants were academically but not socially engaged at university. Consistent with earlier studies (Baxter & Britton, 2001; Christensen & Craft, 2021; Field et al., 2012; Hoskins et al., 1997; McCune et al., 2010; Reay, 2002), they were highly motivated to learn and attending university primarily to improve their future employability prospects and those of their children. All had good attendance records, positive working relationships with academic staff and spent any free time studying independently either at home or on campus. Yet, whilst placing significant time and effort into their studies and achieving relative academic success, their expectations of university life were only partly met with the majority encountering a socially, emotionally and financially challenging first year at university (Christensen et al., 2017).

Participant’s social involvement with peers on their programme and the wider university community, both inside and outside of the classroom, was casual and peripheral (Gallacher et al., 2002; Heagney & Benson, 2017; O’Boyle, 2014). They described feeling different to their younger peers, spending limited time on campus when not in class or working independently and placing their family

roles and responsibilities above socialising (Anderson & Thorpe, 2008; O'Boyle, 2014). Although having little interest for engaging within the wider social aspects of student life, they reported feeling isolated (Mallman & Lee, 2017) and not fitting in within the academic context during and between formal teaching classes (Reay, 2002). They also felt that the university may have provided more opportunities for mature students to mix and support one another with integrating academically and socially into university life, especially during induction and the early stages of their studies.

Several implications emerged from the study for designing more flexible and relational modes of educational provision (Felten & Lambert, 2020). In their landmark article, Su and Wood (2023) defined relational pedagogy as the intentional practice of caring teachers interacting with their students to build and sustain positive relationships that cognitively and emotionally support them throughout their journeys together. This relationship rich approach to educating (Gravett, 2023) is likely to better support the social and academic needs of mature students during their time at university, thus improving their learning experience and equipping them with more of the necessary skills that they need for the future to succeed and reach their potential.

Firstly, institutions may improve their communication strategies for raising awareness of how to access financial and pastoral support services that they provide to mature students and widen eligibility criteria for hardship funds that meet particular needs, such as travel and housing. Secondly, colleagues could also be work loaded to provide mature students with additional one-to-one academic support, both face-to-face and online, either in evening time or at weekends. Thirdly, rather than persisting with traditional scheduling and delivery approaches to university education that assume all learners have the same amount of time and capacity to engage fully with their studies, colleagues should when possible consider condensing timetables, with fewer gaps between teaching sessions across a reduced number of contact days. This blocked delivery, with online elements, would further reduce travel time and costs and allow more time for work, family and caring roles.

Fourthly, elements of university induction could be tailored more towards mature students who are likely to have contrasting needs and motivations to their younger peers. We suggest that different activities to engage with are offered with not just a heavy focus on socialising and a drinking culture. Fifthly, we propose that universities consider creating mature student buddy support groups that are led by peers and provide reassurance and guidance on all aspects of successful academic and social integration. Finally, institutions should provide regular workforce development training that support colleagues, regardless of their discipline, standing and career stage, to further improve their understanding and practice of relational pedagogies.

This study was not without limitations. Whilst only a short recall period between interviews, participant recollections may have been liable to lapses of memory. Additional validation of participant accounts with those from their personal tutors, programme leaders and module tutors would have further strengthened findings. Future research examining the transitional experiences of newly enrolled undergraduate mature students aged 40 years and above is warranted as is revisiting the study participants in their final year of undergraduate study to re-examine their experiences and explore their progress

## Conclusions

Universities are responsible for ensuring all newly arrived students, regardless of background and experience, encounter a happy and successful entry into their institution, make new friendships and networks and have the confidence to fully engage with the academic demands of their programme (Farhat et al., 2017). This study found that participants were academically but not socially engaged throughout their first year of university. Having placed significant time and effort into their studies and achieving relative academic success, their expectations of university life were only partly met with the majority encountering a socially, emotionally, and financially challenging first year. Study findings provide academic and professional service colleagues working within an ever more digital world with further evidence to design increasingly flexible and relational modes of educational

provision that best support the needs, motivations, talents, and expectations of mature students throughout their time at university. The longer-term benefits of these actions are likely to assist with decreasing the retention, progression and achievement disparities that currently exist across the sector between mature and younger aged students.

## Note

1. BTEC Nationals and A-Levels are widely recognised level 3 qualifications that enable entry into higher education settings within the United Kingdom. BTEC's are vocational and renowned for providing specialist and applied work-related learning across a range of sectors whereas A-Levels offer more traditional subjects and class-based approaches to teaching and assessment.

## Disclosure statement

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