



**Summary report:**

# Supporting access and student success for mature learners

April 2021



# 1. INTRODUCTION

Evidence shows that mature students are more likely to drop out of their course than younger students. Mature students also tend to have poorer degree outcomes than young students. TASO's previous evidence synthesis found that there was not enough research on how to support mature students into higher education (HE) and TASO's Theme Working Group recommended TASO undertake more research on this topic. TASO ran a project to help fill this gap and to improve our understanding of the challenges mature learners face in accessing and succeeding in higher education.

This report covers the output of two activities:

- An evidence review to synthesis the existing evidence on effective approaches to supporting mature learners access to HE
- A survey experiment to explore which institutional features are attractive to mature learners. In this experiment we asked online research participants who had left formal education without an undergraduate qualification to rate different fictional HE courses depending on a range of attributes (e.g. size of course, timetabling options). By comparing how participants rated different options we were able to extract insights about which course features were most important to them.

This summary report provides an overview of our findings. More detail on our methodology and findings are given in accompanying [Trial Protocol](#) and [Analysis Report](#).



## 2. KEY FINDINGS

### Evidence review

- There are few rigorously evaluated studies relating to mature learners. The existing studies, with a few exceptions, qualify only as 'weak evidence' in terms of describing how best to support these learners, according to the Office for Students' 'Standards of Evidence' (see table below).
- The majority of the literature on mature students is descriptive and exploratory. This research focuses on self-selecting groups of students who were already engaged in learning, so caution should be exercised when applying the insights to prospective mature students.
- There is a lack of published work focused on understanding the impact of efforts to widen participation among mature learners; the existing literature focuses on understanding and improving the post-entry experience for this group.
- However, there is some limited evidence that transition programmes and information, advice and guidance interventions may be helpful in giving mature students the information and guidance necessary to navigate the unfamiliar world of higher education.
- The findings of our review point to some major themes which can be used to inform future research on how best to attract and support mature students, relating to affirmation, belonging and identity; and affordable, flexible programme offers.
- Mature learners can face many challenges related to identity and belonging in HE institutions – beyond age, class, parenthood status, and the 'worker' vs. 'learner' identity. These differences may set a mature student apart from the 'typical' 18-year-old undergraduate entrant and impede their entry and success in HE.
- There are avenues for research into how HE providers that want to recruit and retain mature students can focus on enhancing a sense of belonging and confidence in these learners.
- A key part of increasing HE uptake among mature learners is to provide programme offers that meet this group's needs. Positive approaches to supporting mature learners may include financial support, flexible scheduling and support for those with caring responsibilities.

### Different types of evidence

TASO's approach to classifying evidence is aligned with the OfS 'Standards of Evidence' which categorises evidence into the following 'types':

- **Type 1** – Narrative: there is a clear narrative for why we might expect an activity to be effective. This narrative is normally based on the findings of other research or evaluation.
- **Type 2** – Empirical Enquiry: there is data which suggests that an activity is associated with better outcomes for students.
- **Type 3** – Causality: a method is used which demonstrates that an activity has a 'causal impact' on outcomes for students. This means it tells us whether an activity causes a difference in outcomes.

### Survey experiment

- Respondents displayed a strong preference for:
  - Courses offering online or blended learning. However, the strength of this finding may reflect the context of the study which was run during the third national UK lockdown in January 2021.
  - Courses within a shorter commute.
- Respondents also preferred:
  - Higher-ranked institutions
  - Those whose policies and practices suggested the institution was supportive of mature students, including offering out-of-hours classes, academic support for mature students, and the presence of a designated staff member whose role was to support mature students - and to a lesser extent, availability of childcare.
  - Smaller courses to larger ones
- In terms of social factors, participants were interested in the extent to which there would be other mature students on their course but were less concerned about social opportunities with other students.

- We also found some interesting results depending on the background of recipients:
  - Younger mature students were less concerned about commuting time and more sensitive to the placement of students in graduate level jobs and course satisfaction associated with courses.
  - There is some evidence to suggest that older respondents were less concerned about availability of childcare than younger respondents.
  - Respondents whose qualifications were at Level 2 (GCSE/equivalent) or below were more responsive to the presence of a mature student support officer than those whose qualifications were at Level 3 or above.
- Those whose qualifications included an incomplete undergraduate qualification reported overall significantly lower likelihoods of enrolling in an undergraduate course than those who had no qualifications at Level 2 or above, although they had higher scores on a survey measuring attitudes towards adult education.
- Increasing age had a small, positive significant association with attitudes towards adult education, but a negative association with the likelihood of enrolling on a course.
- Those who were not in the labour market had significantly less positive attitudes towards adult education compared to those working full time.
- Women, respondents with children, and those whose qualifications were at Level 3 or above had the most positive attitudes towards adult education.



### 3. REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

- Our evidence review found further research is needed into what types of messages are likely to attract mature students to HE and the relative weight they place on the various characteristics of courses when considering their options.
- Our survey experiment was designed to help address this gap and improve the evidence base on which approaches may be most effective at supporting mature learners to progress to HE.
- In terms of external validity, it is important to acknowledge that our study was conducted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, within a survey environment and relied on self-reported preferences and likelihoods. Therefore, we cannot know conclusively how these results might generalise to actual HE decision-making in the broader population, and in post-pandemic context. Further research could involve institutions which offer some of the features we tested exploring the extent to which emphasising these features in outreach and marketing to mature learners could increase interest in actual courses, and even translate through to enrolment.
- It is important to note further limitations to our sample, for example the fact that White/White British individuals were over-represented relative to the mature student body. As a result, we should be careful about how we judge whether some of the factors which our sample indicated as important to them would generalise to the current population of mature students. Additional research on this topic could compare and contrast whether such factors differ substantially between the two groups.
- Regardless of limitations, we hope this study can usefully contribute to the broader evidence landscape and form a foundation for future additional work on other factors which may influence mature student applications to HE, for example the role of cost/fees and the availability of modular education.
- It is important to note that this research focuses on the first stage of supporting mature students, which is interventions that could have potential in getting them through the door. In keeping with the whole-lifecycle approach to widening participation, it is important to also be mindful of the extent to which mature students are supported to succeed once they are enrolled. Our current research suggests that people might expect that academic support and a dedicated staff member will help them succeed, but this should be tested in practice.
- Nonetheless, this study can help institutions think about how best to structure and market their undergraduate offer in order to attract mature learners.



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**TASO** was set up by a consortium of King's College London, Nottingham Trent University and the Behavioural Insights Team. It is funded by the Office for Students and is an affiliate What Works Centre, and part of the UK Government's What Works Movement.