Understanding the support needs of mature students

Carey Newson
Dr Almuth McDowall
Professor Mark NK Saunders

Supported by the University's Widening Access Fund
Understanding the support needs of mature students

Contents

Acknowledgements 2

Executive summary 3

Introduction 5
Study outline 5
Context 6

Relevant literature 14
The experience of mature students 14
Priorities for support 17
Recent research at the University of Surrey 20
Conclusion 21

Consultative workshops 23
The Service Template process 23
Findings 25

Interviews with mature students 42
Lifeline interviews 42
Findings 43

Perspectives from key stakeholders 57
Policy-focused interviews 57
Findings 57

Summary and recommendations 75

References 83

Appendices 86
I Good practice briefing
II Draw a lifeline interview guide
III Generic questions for key stakeholders

1
Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all those who participated in the workshops and interviews for this project, including mature students, support staff and academic staff. A special thanks to committee members of the Mature Student Society – Debbie Crossman, Catriona Peebles, Will Chalmers and Catherine Holman – for their help in facilitating the project. Thanks too to Jon Bramley for advice on the project recommendations and to Jonathan Claydon for assistance with management information. We would also like to acknowledge the research contribution of Constanze Eib in the early stages of this work. The project was made possible by the University of Surrey’s Widening Access Fund, and we are grateful to Debra Ibbotson for her support and encouragement.

Cover photograph: Paul Stead
Cover design: Nigel Barnes

Corresponding author: Carey Newson email: carey@careynewson.org.uk
Executive Summary

This study explores the experience of mature students at the University of Surrey in order to understand perceptions and expectations of the support they currently receive. It aims to identify ways in which that support could be improved, or student expectations more effectively managed. The study was supported by the University’s Widening Access Fund, in recognition that age is an aspect of diversity within the student population, and that the recruitment of mature students – defined as those aged 21 or over at entry – provides avenues into higher education for those that have not previously had the opportunity to study at this level.

The project combined a brief literature review, consultative workshops with mature students, support staff and academic staff, interviews with mature students and interviews with key stakeholders within the University, to synthesise a series of recommendations, and to provide the basis of advice for good practice.

A feature of the study was a remarkable consistency in the themes emerging at each stage of the work, and a considerable degree of consensus between students and staff about the priorities for action.

This included strong agreement on the need for greater attention to the skills needs of mature students from the outset of their studies – with greater clarity about skills requirements for specific courses, an early needs analysis for individual students and a process for addressing skills gaps through appropriate training.

There was also general concern about the accuracy and timeliness of information provided to students, with a particular focus on the need for timetables to be issued more promptly so that those who have caring responsibilities can make practical arrangements to cover for these in advance of enrolment.

The project found a need to raise wider awareness of the mature student perspective among staff, including the different educational routes into undergraduate study, the constraints students face in combining academic demands with other responsibilities and their consequent need to take a time-efficient approach to their university work. It was suggested that mutual expectations of academic support should be more overtly explored and negotiated between tutors and their students at an early stage. A flexible approach from staff was considered important in enabling mature students to reconcile study with family commitments. There was also concern that the induction process should be better designed to meet the needs of mature students, with more sessions tailored to their interests and a more inclusive approach adopted in general sessions addressing all students.
Mature students gave particular precedence to the need to make their experience of studying at Surrey a more sociable one and the value of the University finding ways to facilitate this. This was the area where students participating in the workshops saw the greatest disparity between their current perceptions of support as compared to their expectations. In interviews, several students reported a sense of social disengagement that, at worst, amounted to loneliness and isolation. To address these issues there was a strong desire for a more active social programme and a dedicated common room on campus that would provide a natural meeting place for mature students. A space of this kind was also seen as one solution to problems encountered by those living some distance away from campus, who felt that they were a captive market for the University’s shops and cafes, and had nowhere suitable to gravitate to between lectures where they could relax or study.

A series of detailed recommendations for addressing these issues has been generated through the project, comprising an agenda for change, together with suggestions for taking forward this agenda within the University. These proposals include the appointment of a Mature Student Champion from senior management, complemented by time from a member of staff with operational responsibility for carrying through the improvements, including awareness raising among staff and an expansion in the programme of the Mature Student Society. Good practice materials have been produced, and a briefing is included in the appendices to this report. The full project summary and recommendations can be found on page 75.
Introduction

This project seeks to understand the support that mature students need from the University of Surrey to enable them to undertake their studies well. It was commissioned by the University’s Widening Access Fund in recognition that age is an aspect of diversity within the University’s student population and that the recruitment of mature students – strictly defined as students entering university at 21 or older – provides avenues into higher education for those who have not previously had the opportunity to study at this level. Early disengagement from education and differing educational opportunities have both been identified as obstacles to participation for people with disabilities and from poorer social backgrounds (National Audit Commission, 2002). In addition, mature students studying at both undergraduate and postgraduate level include parents and carers returning to education to improve their career prospects after taking time out of the workplace to look after family and those studying part-time to accommodate domestic commitments. For all these reasons the experience of mature students is critical in promoting diversity, social mobility and equality of opportunity.

Study outline

In exploring the experience of mature students at Surrey, the study aims to understand their perceptions and expectations of the support they currently receive and to identify ways in which that support could be improved or student expectations better managed. One potential benefit from this is an improvement in the progression and retention of students in older age groups. There is concern that those entering university at 21 or older achieve lower progression rates than younger entrants. At Surrey, in 2010/11, 74% of undergraduates aged 21 or older on entry progressed into their second year of study from the previous year, as against 81% of those entering at 20 and under. While this difference has been attributed by the University\(^1\) to mature students’ non-standard entry qualifications rather than age per se, it may nevertheless be possible to address the issue by improving the mature student experience in a variety of ways.

The study has four components:

- A brief review of the literature on the experience of mature students and their priorities for support;

- Five consultative workshops run with mature students, academic staff and support staff at the University, using the Service Template process developed by Williams & Saunders (2006). These were intended to map the characteristics of university support important to mature students and gauge expectations and perceptions in relation to each characteristic;

---

\(^1\) University of Surrey Widening Participation Strategic Assessment 15/5/2009
• Interviews with 18 individual mature students focusing on the narrative of their university life, using the ‘drawing my lifeline’ approach pioneered by Hopson & Scally (2009). These were intended to provide a more personal perspective on the challenges these students experience at university and the support they encounter to help them in meeting these challenges and coping with university life;

• Nine policy-focused interviews with 13 stakeholders (as some interviews were undertaken jointly) whose position in the University gives them specific insight into the needs of mature students or the support they currently receive. These were intended to provide a better understanding of existing support and to ensure that recommendations are made in the context of the organisation’s tacit knowledge about current practices and the opportunities for improvement.

The findings from each stage of the research have been synthesized into an agenda for change, offering recommendations for good practice.

Context

1. Mature students at Surrey

Mature students at the University of Surrey make up a sizable minority: in 2010/11, 28% of all undergraduate students at the University were aged 21 or over at entry. The proportion of mature entrants is especially high in the Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences at 55%, but other faculties also have considerable numbers of mature students amongst their intake, with 12% in Arts and Human Sciences; 16% in Engineering and Physical Sciences; 22% in Management and Law and 25% in the Guildford School of Acting. Looking at individual departments, (see Figure 1) mature student levels are at their highest in Health and Social Care (74%), followed by Language and Translation Studies (32%), and represent more than a fifth of undergraduates in English, Electronic Engineering and the School of Management.

As can be seen in Figure 2, while the majority of the University’s mature undergraduates are aged 25 or over, rather fewer enter in their mid to late 20s than from 21 to 24, or after 30. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of postgraduate students are over 21 at entry, though again, those aged 21-24 or 30 plus are both more numerous than those in their mid to late 20s.

Surrey’s overall levels of mature undergraduates have seen a slight decline in the last two years, from 30% in 2008/09.
Figure 1: Percentage of undergraduate students in each department aged 21 or over at entry, University of Surrey 2010/11

Figure 2: Current students at the University of Surrey in 2010/11, by age at entry

Source of data for both graphs: Management information, University of Surrey
Performance indicators, reported to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), show that, in 2009/10, 8% of Surrey’s mature full-time undergraduates, and 5.5% of those that are first degree entrants, were from under-represented groups. These indicators, while below location benchmarks provided by HESA (11.6% and 9.7% respectively\(^2\)), were an improvement on the previous year.

2. National policy

Nationally, participation by mature students in higher education has risen with the wider expansion of the sector. Between 1982 and 1992, the number of UK mature students entering universities, polytechnics and colleges more than doubled (Saunders, 1994). A subsequent decline in the second half of the ‘90s grew steeper with the introduction of tuition fees in 1998 (Davies et al., 2002). Since 2000/2001 however, the number of UK mature students taking first degrees has risen by 64%, with the strongest growth in part-time study.\(^3\)

**Figure 3: UK domicile first year first degree students aged 21 years and over at UK higher education institutions 1998/99 - 2009/10**

Note: Data are based on a snapshot population of students enrolled on the 1\(^{st}\) December of the academic year. Source of data: Higher Education Statistics Agency

---

\(^2\) Location adjusted benchmarks, provided by the Higher Education Statistics Agency, take account of the student’s home region as well as entry qualifications and subject mix. HESA clarifies that these are not targets but are provided to give information about the sort of values that might be expected for an institution’s indicator if no factors other than those allowed for were important.

\(^3\) Following considerable discussion, HESA was unable to find a satisfactory explanation for the substantial rise in part-time entrants after 2002/03, but is satisfied that this is genuine and is not attributable to changes in data collection.
Over this period a number of policies have sought to support participation by older learners. Foundation degrees, developed in consultation with employers, were introduced in 2001. These can contribute towards a full honours degree, providing an additional avenue for mature learners, alongside the already established Access courses, which prepare students for university study, and gained wider recognition through a national framework in 1989. In its 2003 White Paper on Higher Education, the Labour Government announced plans for an expansion in provision and funding of Foundation degrees as part of its widening access agenda. The 2006 Leitch Review placed further emphasis on the need for adults to gain work-related skills, recommending better engagement between employers and universities and the provision of broader learning opportunities beyond full-time study. The review proposed a target, subsequently adopted by Government, for 40% of all adults in England to gain a university qualification by 2020. Since the late ‘90s, universities have received additional funding for their mature students, in the form of a premium from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), designed to cover additional costs of recruitment and support for students re-entering education after a break.

Since October 2006, age discrimination has been illegal in education, training and employment. Eligibility for student loans to cover tuition fees has no upper age limit, though student finance is not usually available to applicants who have already taken a first honours degree, and maintenance loans are restricted to those under 60.

At the same time there has been criticism of the treatment of mature and part-time students in higher education as marginalizing this group despite their numbers. It has been argued that in focusing on increasing participation by younger students from poorer backgrounds policymakers have neglected the position of mature students (Bowl, 2003). In 2009, the Commons Select Committee on Students and Universities highlighted the disproportionate allocation of funding for undergraduate education for younger full-time entrants, with evidence that 17-20 year olds made up 60% of initial entrants to higher education but were set to receive 75% of funding in 2010/11. The committee argued that the failure of the system to treat mature and part-time students on the same basis as their younger full-time counterparts amounted to discrimination. While criticisms focused predominantly on restrictions to student finance for part-time places, the committee also voiced concerns about the adequacy of the information provided to prospective students on course times and time commitments, arguing that this was particularly critical for mature students making arrangements for childcare.

Following the proposed rises in tuition fees, the issue of mature students’ access to university education has been flagged in policy statements around university access agreements, in which universities charging variable tuition fees set out what action they are taking to promote and protect access for low income groups. In its guidance to the Director of Fair Access (2011), the Conservative-led Coalition Government states that it wants to support both mature students and those studying part-time, and would like to
see institutions consider these students in their overall approach to access. Subsequent guidance to universities on their access agreements (OFFA, 2011) suggests that outreach activities, designed to widen participation among under-represented groups, could be targeted at mature students in communities with low participation rates in post-compulsory education; and that universities may want to consider providing courses that could be more attractive and accessible to mature students, among others. Examples include part-time courses and distance learning. From September 2012, part-time students studying at least 0.25fte will be eligible for Government loans to cover tuition fees, whereas prior to this, part-time courses taking more than twice as long to complete as the equivalent full-time course were not eligible. Part-time provision is particularly important for mature entrants who account for 93% of part-time undergraduate enrolments (Hansard, 2010). Clearly, these supportive policies exist against the backdrop of the planned rise in the tuition fee cap, whose impact on mature student participation is at present unknown.

3. Support offered to mature students at Surrey

The University of Surrey already has support in place which is specifically aimed at mature students. A Mature Student Society runs a drop in session for mature students during the University’s induction week, organises social events in the course of the year and produces an occasional newsletter. In 2010, Student Learning Advice ran a pre-entry session specifically for mature students and offered other study skills sessions tailored to their needs. The University has a mature student guide, published in 2007 and now somewhat outdated, which contains information on:

- support and facilities, including personal tutors, learning support tutors and pre-entry sessions;
- the availability of study and personal skills sessions – though this precedes the introduction of pre-entry sessions explicitly for mature students;
- the Student Advice and Information Service;
- accommodation and car parking;
- the University’s on-site nursery and contacts for finding childcare in the immediate area;
- the Mature Students’ Association (a predecessor to the current Mature Student Society);
- what it is like to be a mature student at Surrey – i.e. mature student quotes and profiles;
- making an application and general entry requirements.

Both the role of the Mature Student Society and the experience of running preparatory sessions were explored in discussions with key stakeholders in the last stage of research for this report.
4. Comparison with other UK universities

At the outset of this study a web search was conducted of the support for mature students to be found on 62 UK university websites, including that of the University of Surrey. The survey covered the 20 institutions in the Russell Group of universities, the 19 institutions in the 1994 Group (of which Surrey is a member) and 23 of the remaining UK universities (accounting for 25% of these).

Most university websites offered a search facility (e.g. keyword or Google). In this box the word ‘mature’ was entered and the first two pages of upcoming results were then searched for relevant information. When a search facility was not offered by the website, specific web areas, such as “prospective students”, “student life”, “student support” and “studies”, were searched individually in order to ascertain what information was available for mature entrants. The survey was carried out over a two-week period in Autumn 2010.

Information featured on the University of Surrey’s website included a webpage dedicated to mature students (in the “How to Apply” section) and, at a separate web location, the University’s mature student handbook. Using the search strategy described above the availability of dedicated study skills courses for mature students was not apparent. There was no link from the application page to the handbook.

Most of the searched university websites offered at least a webpage dedicated to mature students, though 25 did not. Some websites used the terms “adult learners” or “older students” instead, and in some cases information was found on a web area for “life long learning” or “widening participation”. The majority of websites offered information for mature students on the application process and on finances. Just over half included information on childcare facilities.

One in five of the university websites offered some kind of booklet for mature students; just over one in three included profiles, quotes or case studies of mature students in booklets or websites; and just over one in six made reference to some kind of mature student association. In each case, as shown in Table 1, these featured more commonly among the Russell Group universities – perhaps surprising, since Purcell et al., (2007) found that mature graduates were more likely to have studied at a new university or HE college than at an older institution.

Just under half of universities (47%) offered induction sessions and/or special events targeted at mature students. These included open days, information sessions, mature students’ afternoons, tea parties, welcome events, lunches, guided campus tours, visit days and ‘taster’ days. A small number of universities ran summer schools for mature students (Cambridge, East Anglia and Strathclyde) and several universities, like Surrey, offered sessions or courses to prepare mature students for university (Leeds, Newcastle, Reading and the School of Oriental and African Studies).
Table 1: Percentage of universities indicating various types of support on their websites and the availability of this support at Surrey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support dedicated to mature students</th>
<th>Percentage of universities indicating this support on website</th>
<th>Inclusion on University of Surrey website</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Russell Group (20)</td>
<td>1994 Group (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Webpage</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handbook</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Association</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAQs</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profiles/quotes</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Induction/special events</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare facilities</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application info</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance info</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Although in practice the University of Surrey offers a dedicated drop in session and pre-entry day for mature students, this was not apparent from the University’s website.

A few universities offered special support contacts for mature students’ issues – e.g. a mature students’ adviser, a mature students’ officer or a mature student committee. Some universities offered peer support for mature students through a mentor scheme (Bristol, Leeds, Newcastle and Sheffield).

Study skills courses most commonly offered for mature students were very similar to the courses universities offer for all students, for example, essay writing, effective reading, referencing, presentation skills, IT skills and time management. However, it was difficult to determine from the web search which of these sessions were dedicated to mature students.

In relation to mature student profiles, case studies and tips, universities made use of a variety of formats. The University of Leeds showed videos of mature students on its website. Royal Holloway (part of the University of London) published a newsletter for mature students, which included commonly experienced barriers and how to overcome them. Southampton Solent University recounted the experience of a mature student at various stages of the application process. The University of Strathclyde included an interview with a mature student, comparing expectations with the reality of university life. The University of Oxford advised on common hopes and expectations; difficulties of adjusting to university life; feelings that might come up; and ways that could help in overcoming problems. Aston University offered tips by mature students for mature students. The University of Liverpool provided 22 pages profiling the experience of mature students from different backgrounds and on different courses, including lessons learnt.
From this brief exercise it is apparent that Surrey’s existing offer to mature students is reasonably broad in scope when compared with similar universities, but that some obvious improvements could be made. The handbook was in need of updating and Surrey’s dedicated mature student pre-entry days and induction session were not apparent on the University’s website using the adopted search strategy. Some of the schemes run in other universities – such as peer support through a mentor scheme, special support contacts and a mature student summer school – provide potentially useful ideas for the development of Surrey’s own provision.

- **In 2010/11, 28% of all undergraduate students at the University of Surrey were aged 21 years or over at entry;**
- **The proportion of mature students is especially high in the Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences at 55%, with considerable numbers in the other faculties;**
- **Participation by mature students has grown with the expansion of the higher education sector, though there was a decline in the second half of the ‘90s exacerbated by the introduction of tuition fees;**
- **Since 2000/2001, the number of UK mature students taking first degrees has risen by 64%, with the strongest growth in part-time study;**
- **Mature students taking a first degree are generally eligible for student loans to cover tuition fees and there are plans to extend the conditions of eligibility for part-time students from September 2012;**
- **Existing support for mature students at Surrey includes a Mature Student Society, a dedicated pre-entry day and study skills sessions, an on-site nursery and a mature student guide book;**
- **An Internet search of support offered to mature students by universities shows that the majority offer a dedicated webpage, provide guidance for mature students on applications and student finance and refer to childcare facilities;**
- **Only a minority of universities appeared to have a mature student association, a handbook for mature students or specially targeted events/induction sessions;**
- **Surrey’s provision for mature students is comparatively broad in scope, but its handbook is outdated and the support available is not fully promoted on the website;**
- **Schemes run at other universities – such as support contacts and mentoring for mature students – may be of interest in developing Surrey’s provision through the current project.**
Relevant literature

Studies have examined mature students in terms of their motivations for study, their academic performance, their accounts of university life, and their priorities for support. As several authors comment (e.g., Davies et al., 2002), mature students are a very diverse group, whether in terms of age, previous education, financial circumstances, nationality or family commitments. They may be undergraduate or postgraduate, part-time or full-time, live on campus or off. Any generalized comments about their experience must be made with caution. This said, several persistent themes recur in the research literature.

The experience of mature students

Studies have found prospective and enrolled mature students to be motivated by prospects of career advancement, the desire to improve qualifications, an interest in their chosen subject and the opportunity for personal development or for finding a change of direction in their lives (Davies & Williams, 2001; Reay, 2002; Shanahan, 2000). They may be motivated to prove themselves to others or keen to enrich their understanding of experiences they have gained through working (McCune et al., 2010). However, Davies & Williams (2001) found that in contemplating higher education, prospective entrants weighed competing demands and uncertain outcomes. The decision to study presented a complex equation in which loss of income and the acquisition of debt were balanced against long term economic benefits. Fear of debt and insufficient finance were the main disincentives to entry. For parents deciding to study, time not spent with family was seen as a high immediate cost to be reckoned against other benefits such as providing a role model to children. Preparing to enter higher education also involved a transition toward a redefined identity as a learner, which remained fragile as potential entrants approached their studies. Investing in this new identity, while it offered self-esteem and family status, also carried the fear of failure. The authors characterize the whole decision making process as one of fragility and risk – concepts which surface repeatedly in the wider literature describing the mature student experience.

Reay’s (2002) study of working class mature students making the transition to higher education from an inner London FE college also presents this as a precarious process. She found participants strongly motivated by education as a form of self-realisation, but managing a delicate balance between “investing in a new improved identity and holding on to a cohesive self” (p 403). Negotiation between safety and challenge was another strong theme in their accounts, with the majority erring on the side of safety in their choice of institution for further study, following the discomfort of earlier educational experiences.

Identity and the redefining of identity are central to the account provided by Walters (2000), in her study of mature students’ perceptions, gathered through interviews, questionnaires and life histories. For many of them, the journey into higher education progressed through an identifiable pattern: the decision to study was taken following
recognition of the need for change, brought on because an earlier perspective or framework was no longer relevant or meaningful. This might be triggered by alienation from an existing role or by life events, such as children leaving home or divorce, which led to a change in role or self-concept. Walters encapsulates the experience as ‘The three Rs framework’, comprising Redundancy, Recognition and Regeneration. While this transformative process could involve pain and loss, for most participants it led ultimately to greater confidence and self-actualisation, as they felt liberated to pursue new opportunities.

Such desirable outcomes clearly depend on, literally, staying the course. Lower progression rates amongst mature students may be seen as one indicator of the fragility invoked by Davies & Williams. Honey & Botterill (1999), investigating the experience of mature students on hospitality management courses across the UK, reported that the overall drop-out rate for these entrants was around double that for younger learners, with financial hardship the main reason for students not completing. Interestingly, the study found that course directors were unaware of these higher drop-out rates. The authors speculate that positive impressions made by more successful older learners “mask the fact that some of the more silent students simply slip away” (p.9). Ozga & Sukhnandan, examining undergraduate non-completions, suggest that life circumstances are more often a factor for older learners than for younger ones, again confirming the notion of fragility.

Leathwood & O’Connell (2003) observe, in their study of non-traditional learners (who included but were not exclusively mature students) that, for many, the experience of higher education is one of struggle, fuelled by problems around finance, confidence in ability and institutional factors, such as a perceived lack of support from teaching staff. Lack of confidence and an ongoing struggle to reconcile competing priorities were prominent themes in Shanahan’s (2000) study of a small number of mature female students on healthcare programmes. Her participants viewed their courses as a catalyst for change in their lives, but lacked confidence about their own academic abilities and were anxious about assessment. The importance the women attached to their studies made the pressure to succeed acute, while the pressure of juggling the demands of home and university, left them feeling “extreme guilt” that they were doing nothing properly (p 156). The experience was stressful, though made considerably less so through peer support from other mature students in the same situation. Thomas (2002), examining factors contributing to student retention generally, notes the importance of friendships and social networks.

Other studies also find mature students doubting their own abilities (Challis, 1976; Edwards, 1990; Burns et al., 1993). Despite such doubts – or perhaps because they try harder in compensation – a number of studies have found that mature students perform as well or better academically than younger students (Burns et al., 1993, Cantwell et al., 2001), showing a deeper approach to study and a richer understanding of what they are
Understanding the support needs of mature students, Newson, McDowall & Saunders

learning (Richardson, 1995; McCune et al., 2010). Analysis at University College London (Lucas & Paton, 2003) found that mature students, particularly over the age of 40, were more likely to gain a ‘good’ degree than traditional age entry students, though there was a consistent finding that the age group 21-24 was relatively strongly represented in the lower class degree categories. In an Australian study, McKenzie & Gow (2004) comparing mature students to school leavers in Queensland found older learners on average attained slightly higher grades in the first semester of university and showed higher achievement motivation; a more internal locus of control; a greater investment in the value of the task; and more frequent espousal of learning goals. In contrast to the self-doubt found in other studies, this research found higher levels of self-efficacy among mature learners than younger students. One explanation is that the doubts shown by mature students in their own abilities reflect the risks perceived in committing time and money to study and attendant high expectations placed on themselves in trying to ensure these risks pay off. McCune et al. (2010), in their study of Scottish students, found age correlated positively with students wanting to prove to themselves or others what they could do. Another interpretation is that confidence and a lack of confidence are characteristics for distinct sub-groups within the mature student population.

Some studies have sought to distinguish between such sub-groups in understanding the different obstacles that face mature students. Comparing home mature students to international mature students in another Australian study, Leder & Fogasz (2004) found the home students more often cited difficulties in balancing study against social activities or family life and paid work. The main obstacle for them was financial constraints and a lack of knowledge about financial support systems. For international students, language competence was a substantial problem, with frequent references to being lonely, having few friends and finding it difficult to work fruitfully with others.

Tones et al. (2009), in research with mature students in Queensland, found that for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, the main barriers were family and financial responsibilities; uncertainty about university expectations; feeling different from school leavers; and not knowing where to go for help. These students also had more limited personal resources in terms of financial assets, health, study skills and access to a home computer. For mature students aged 35 to 44 the most common barriers involved childcare and care responsibilities; while mature students over the age of 45 seemed to be disadvantaged by a lack of computer skills and uncertainty about where to go for help at university. In contrast, external, part-time, fourth year and postgraduate mature students all appeared to experience fewer barriers and support needs.
• Mature students are commonly motivated by the prospect of career enhancement, improving qualifications, subject interest, finding a new direction or pursuing a path of personal development;

• The decision to study often involves weighing finely balanced costs and benefits affecting students and their families in both the short term and long term, and the process is characterised by fragility and risk;

• Studying as a mature learner can be seen as a way of negotiating a life transition that involves redefinition of identity and, if successfully navigated, can fuel self-confidence and bring new opportunities into view;

• Coping with financial constraints and juggling conflicting demands can make the mature student experience an ongoing struggle;

• Lack of confidence about academic ability is a common problem for mature students, despite the fact that they appear typically to perform as well or better than school leavers;

• Feelings of difference and social isolation can be an obstacle for some mature students while peer support networks can be very helpful;

• Different groups of mature students face different obstacles and accordingly need different types of support.

Priorities for support

A number of studies, including several of those described above, have identified institutional support that could help in overcoming the barriers faced by mature students and improving their experience.

Davies & Williams (2001) found that for potential mature entrants the decision to apply to a specific university was strongly influenced by location, attitudes to mature students and course structure. Among the practical problems perceived by this group were a lack of information about courses, poor information, unhelpful staff and an emphasis on the young. Timetabling problems were widely identified as an issue, both in terms of difficulties in finding out ahead of the course what the commitments would be and the assumption that family commitments were not a relevant consideration for timetable planning. The authors found their respondents sensed that universities were “designed primarily for young, single people” (p.199).

Asked to advise institutions on attracting more mature students, the participants put forward many suggestions (Davies et al., 2002). Several of these concerned staff attitudes
and awareness – for example, that mature students should be welcomed, not patronized; that admissions tutors should not give negative responses; and that tutors’ lack of knowledge about Access courses should be addressed. Others related to support in accommodating mature students’ competing demands, for example, the provision of childcare; timetabling to accommodate family commitments; and a curriculum workload that allowed for sustaining part-time work. Further recommendations focused on improvements in the availability and quality of information, including timetabling, childcare, costs and financial entitlements. These participants favoured some dedicated resources, suggesting a mature student open day and a mature student prospectus.

In their Queensland study, Tones et al. (2009) drew on initial findings to put forward a series of potential support services to mature students, namely:

- a specialised course targeted toward mature-aged students through the university’s teaching and learning support programme, including computing and study skills;
- staff awareness training, including tips for lecturing and assisting mature students in their learning – for example, encouraging lecturers and tutors to draw on the life experience of mature students;
- a mature student survival guide, providing a realistic understanding of university study and available services for mature students;
- the potential for students to elect to study internally or externally for each enrolled unit at the start of each semester, reducing contact time on campus;
- a mature student orientation at the start of orientation week to assist in forming peer networks/support amongst mature-aged students.

They found different mature student sub-groups responded more positively to different measures in terms of their relevance and helpfulness: those of lower economic status favoured staff awareness training and a dedicated orientation, while those over the age of 45 favoured specialized courses, a booklet detailing support services and the establishment of mature student networks.

Gorard et al. (2006) in a review of widening participation research, conclude that structural flexibility in the delivery of programmes is of upmost importance in enabling students to combine studying with other responsibilities such as work and family. They suggest that remote learning, part-time provision, off-campus provision, early availability of timetables and more accommodating timetabling could all contribute in making this easier.

Honey & Botterill’s (1999) found that the primary concerns of the mature hospitality management students in their study were common to all students and included good IT
facilities and libraries, open and pleasant relationships with academic staff and prompt and adequate feedback on written assignments. In this case, the participants preferred full integration with others, and were wary that being treated as a special group would exacerbate a sense of difference.

Shanahan (2000) suggests that lecturers can provide important support for mature students by helping them to explore doubts in their own abilities when these arise, emphasizing the advantages of their greater life experience in approaching their studies, as well as encouraging social and study networks between these students, to facilitate peer support. In addition, she suggests that early formative feedback would help in building confidence. Bowl (2001) also focuses on the role of staff in demystifying university expectations for the benefit of non-traditional students. Thomas (2002), in a study which looked at the way in which university support could contribute to retention amongst full-time students of all ages, emphasizes the importance of institutions’ values and practices in supporting diversity. She identifies key issues to be the approachability of staff and their readiness to develop inclusive teaching models that accept and respect difference; and the institution’s ability to facilitate social networks and peer support through the provision of opportunities to socialize and to learn collaboratively.

---

Studies suggest a variety of ways in which institutions can help to support mature students in higher education. These include:

- **Changes in the delivery of programmes to accommodate demands from family and work, for example through sympathetic timetabling, part-time provision and remote access to study;**
- **Increased staff awareness and sensitivity about the needs of mature students and the involvement of tutors in helping them to understand university expectations and recognise the value of their own life experience;**
- **Improvements in the availability and quality of information, including advice on childcare, costs and financial entitlements and earlier provision of timetables;**
- **Initiatives to facilitate peer support between mature students;**
- **Provision of specialist courses to help mature students gain relevant study and IT skills;**
- **Introduction of a dedicated mature student induction day and guide.**
Recent research at the University of Surrey

Two studies at the University of Surrey, supported by the University’s Widening Access Fund, throw light on mature students’ expectations and perceptions. Armstrong & Burden (2010) conducted a focus group and interviews with mature students to gain their perspective on the induction process and their first year experience. They found participants very disappointed by a lack of social experiences at university. Freshers’ Week was perceived to have been largely a waste of their time, given its strong focus on the needs of younger students and campus life. Participants felt that there was no attempt to differentiate them from younger students or provide them with information that was specifically relevant to them. Some reported the same issue in their subsequent experience of learning, with some staff implicitly assuming that all students were 18 years old.

There was also a desire for more information to be available ahead of enrolment to help students in preparing to study. They wanted reading lists, study skills materials and timetables well in advance, to allow them to prepare academically and to make adequate care arrangements for children and older relatives.

The authors put forward a series of recommendations to address these issues, including raising awareness amongst staff about the potential for causing embarrassment or offence through their treatment of mature students (for example, asking all students to give their age in tutor groups); highlighting mature students’ transferable skills; Departmental provision of preparatory reading and study skills advice; earlier access to timetables; and separate provision for mature students at interviews and open days. As a result of concerns raised through the study, a Mature Student Society was established, special sessions were run for mature students in induction week and the library’s SPLASH team ran a pre-entry day targeted at mature students.

The University’s Widening Access Fund also supported a research project to investigate how e-learning could be used to improve the experience of non-traditional students (O’Driscoll et al., 2010). The study is relevant to this research, both because it investigated the needs of mature students and because e-learning is sometimes put forward as a way of providing more flexible learning delivery that will assist mature students in accommodating other demands.

Barriers to improvement in this area, identified through the study, included a tendency by staff to under-estimate the proportion and type of non-traditional students they taught, and staff’s limited knowledge about how to adapt their teaching and learning for these groups. The authors found that e-learning was unevenly integrated into programme delivery, with some staff much more confident than others in its use. There were also staff concerns about the impact of e-learning on attendance for face-to-face sessions. A further barrier was that non-traditional students had less prior experience of computers and Internet at home, less confidence in using ICT and some problems in gaining access to
computers. Mature students, answering an online survey, were less likely to strongly agree that they were confident with ICT than non-mature students (28% as against 47% respectively). Despite such challenges, non-traditional students were generally more positive towards e-learning than traditional students, and the researchers speculate that this may reflect their need to balance the demands of family and employment with their studies.

The report put forward a series of recommendations, with the aim of increasing institutional awareness of the presence of non-traditional students and the challenges facing them; and ensuring the integration of e-learning into all learning and teaching activity. The proposals sought to raise the visibility and promotion of the online support and resources available (e.g. at induction and pre-entry days) and to support all students in reaching a baseline level of digital literacy (e.g. through skills audits, learning support and student mentoring). The project also produced good practice guidelines for staff, which encouraged them to be aware and supportive of students that are less familiar with technology and have less immediate access to computers.

Previous studies at the University of Surrey have considered the first year experience and the use of e-learning from the perspective of mature students. Recommendations arising from these studies include:

- Raising awareness amongst staff about sensitive and supportive treatment of mature students;
- Advice in advance of enrolling on study skills and preparatory reading;
- Earlier access to timetables to facilitate students making care arrangements;
- Separate provision for mature students at open days and interview days;
- Formation of a Mature Student Society – since established;
- Integration of e-learning into all learning and teaching activity;
- Greater visibility of online support services, including at induction;
- Support to help all students reach a baseline level of digital literacy.

Conclusion

In short, in the research literature the mature student experience has been viewed as a transformative process, resulting in greater confidence and self realisation, but also as an endeavour characterised by fragility and risk. This may entail students struggling to reconcile competing demands; to cope with financial constraints; to overcome doubts about their own abilities and to deal with feelings of difference. Despite these challenges, a number of studies report that mature students, overall, do as well or better than school leavers in academic terms.
Studies have suggested a variety of ways in which institutions can support mature students more effectively. These include changes in the delivery of programmes to help in accommodating wider commitments; initiatives to increase staff awareness and sensitivity towards the needs of mature students; improvements in the quality of information and advice; specialist courses to help in addressing skills needs; tailored induction days; and initiatives to encourage better peer support. Several of these suggestions are echoed in the recommendations of recent research projects at the University of Surrey, focusing on the first year experience and on e-learning, and can be expected to prove relevant in the current consultation.
Consultative workshops

To explore student and staff expectations and perceptions about the support mature students receive at the University of Surrey, a series of consultative workshops were facilitated. Of these, two were with mature students, one was with academic staff and one was with support staff. These four workshops were followed by a brainstorming session, in which representatives from each group were brought together to discuss their earlier conclusions and explore recommendations for change.

The Service Template process

The format of the workshops followed the Service Template process, originated by Williams, Saunders & Staughton (1999) as a means of evaluating the quality of a service relationship from the perspective of both the users and deliverers of that service. The Service Template has been developed as a tool for exploring common understandings in order to build consensus around an agenda for improvement, and has been used, for example, in the context of relationships in the social housing sector; dissertation supervision at a new university; and the author-publisher relationship at an international publishing company (Williams & Saunders, 2006).

The approach draws on Kelly’s personal construct theory (1955), which holds that individuals define and make sense of their social world through a series of personally constructed characteristics or ‘constructs’. Each construct is conceived as a bipolar trait e.g. cheerful/sullen; sensitive/brash. Taken together they enable people, consciously or unconsciously, to map the personalities of other people they know.

In the Service Template process, individuals are invited to identify a series of characteristics of the service under evaluation, which they consider are important to users. For each characteristic identified they then define what would be the ‘ideal’ and what would be the ‘worst’ scenario in relation to this aspect of the service. From this information, each characteristic is mapped out on paper as a horizontal scale, where 10 is ideal and 1 is worst, and the group’s descriptions of what would be ideal and worst are recorded at each end of the scale. In this way a ‘template’ is gradually constructed in the course of the workshop, providing a visual representation of the group’s deliberations.

For each characteristic, participants are asked to agree a score from 1 to 10, first in terms of what level of service they consider could reasonably be expected; and second in terms of what level of service is currently perceived to be provided. Where there are disagreements within the group or where there is thought to be a range in perceived quality of service (e.g. from different people or at different times) the score is given as a range.

Having mapped all the key characteristics in this way, the participants are asked to give them a weighting in terms of their importance, by distributing 100 points between them.
In doing so they are told that they can decide for themselves whether to distribute points to every characteristic or just some of them.

The template constructed through the process described above shows:

- what characteristics of the service are considered important by the group;
- how these aspects translate in practice into ideal and worst case scenarios;
- how well they consider the service would score on each of these characteristics if meeting users’ reasonable expectations;
- how well participants perceive the service currently does score on each of these characteristics;
- how far current perceptions of the service are thought to align with users’ expectations;
- what relative weight the group gives to each of the characteristics it has identified and defined.

A key strength of the approach is that, though led by a facilitator, it is participant-driven: the group determines what matters, and their language is defining each characteristic is closely reflected in the resulting template.

For the present study, each of the four workshops was asked to consider: *The support that mature students need from the University to enable them to undertake their studies well.*

The two workshops for mature students (M1 & M2) were each attended by eight participants, with representation from the four faculties. Of these 16 mature students there were four in their late 20s, four in their 30s, seven in their 40s, and one in her early 60s. They were predominantly undergraduates, but included three studying for an MSc and one for a PhD. The students were recruited by several means: through the Mature Student Society; through posters around the campus and an advertisement in a University e-newsletter.

The workshop for academic staff had seven participants and included representation from the four main faculties (one from Arts & Humanities; three from Management & Law; one from Engineering & Physical Sciences and two from Health & Medical Sciences). This was a purposive sample, and staff were invited on the basis that their role gave them contact with mature students.

The workshop for support staff had seven participants drawn from Library and Learning Support (two participants); Student Advice; Student Health Care; The Centre for Wellbeing; Student Experience Change and the Centre for Educational and Academic Development. Again, this was a purposive sample, and staff were invited to take part on
the basis that their role and experience would provide insight into support provided to mature students.

Each workshop lasted two hours and the sessions were held over a period of one and a half months. All participants were then invited to take part in a follow up brainstorming session, which also lasted two hours and took place three weeks after the fourth workshop. This session was attended by 14 participants: eight mature students (with representation from two faculties: Management & Law and Arts and Humanities); four support staff (from Library & Learning Support; Student Experience Change; the Centre for Educational and Academic Development; and the Centre for Wellbeing) and two academic staff (both from the Faculty for Health and Medical Sciences).

At the brainstorming session participants were reminded about the format of the templates, before being divided into their original workshop groups and given paper copies of the templates that their group had earlier created. They then spent a short time familiarising themselves with these templates and their key issues. After this they were reshuffled into three new groups, each of which held a mix of participants from the four different workshops. They were asked:

- to take turns in explaining to each other the templates they had produced;
- to consider the similarities and differences between these templates; and finally,
- to discuss and agree on key actions for improvement.

It was suggested that these actions might be ways of improving the mature student experience or ways of managing mature students’ expectations; and that they might involve advice to staff or students or changes in University practice.

**Findings**

The templates produced by the four workshops are shown on the following pages. What is perhaps most striking is the degree of similarity: the characteristics and related issues coalesced around the same broad themes. At a more detailed level however there were some substantive differences in focus and emphasis.
Figure 4: Template from Mature Student Workshop 1
“The support mature students need from the University to enable them to undertake their studies well”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHARACTERISTIC</th>
<th>WT</th>
<th>IDEAL</th>
<th>WORST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Advance information to allow planning in relation to wider life e.g. timetabling</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>All information up front; am told what they want me to do, why they want me to do it, and when by; complete clarity, specifically in relation to the timetable</td>
<td>Timetable on the day; information buried on Internet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Provision of support to fill gaps in background knowledge / study skills, including timely information about this support</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Recognition of diversity of background and strength in diversity; assessment of need made in partnership with the student; ongoing study workshops after the induction period; a one-stop shop for accessing this support</td>
<td>Very limited support; support provided doesn't ‘do what it says on the tin'; only one hit at start of term; referred to booklet, which refers you to another booklet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Awareness of wider life needs that compete for students’ time</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Flexibility in provision of support services; available at different times of day e.g. not all on Tuesday morning; flexibility over when course work delivered; genuine choice</td>
<td>Tight schedule; take it or leave it approach; comments which are patronising / disregard the problem, such as “you'll be fine / you'll pick it up / it doesn't matter”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Opportunities to meet other mature students</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>A venue for mature students and some kind of programme to facilitate social contact, maintained by the University</td>
<td>Vice Chancellor's response on providing these opportunities is “You will mingle” (i.e. with all students); feeling that you’ve been left out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Help with work from a tutor that is allocated to you and has mature student awareness</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Can make an appointment for a private consultation; clarity about what is wanted for assignments and goals; tutor is reachable (e.g. in Law department there is dedicated support for mature students)</td>
<td>Tutor doesn't know you are a mature student and all their questions are irrelevant e.g. do you know how to manage your money?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Availability of facilities to support those not living on campus and so unable to go home during the day</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Access to microwave; high quality low cost food and stationery etc.; less outsourcing</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Quality of induction / how far it is tailored to mature students' needs</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Tailored package for mature students with pages on the intranet &amp; in hard copy to come back to if you have missed something; information related to mature students needs e.g. travel advice for people living off campus; recognition of needs of mature student community e.g. question and answer session</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stuff is expensive and highly marked up; inconsistent pricing and low quality</td>
<td></td>
<td>Lumped in with everyone else; mature student sessions, if offered, are low priority in that session is squeezed on to the timetable and the meeting area too crowded</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

E = Reasonable expectations; P = Perceptions of current provision; \( \approx \) = Score overlap; Score of 1 = Worst; Score of 10 = Ideal
Figure 5: Template from Mature Student Workshop 2
“The support mature students need from the University to enable them to undertake their studies well”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHARACTERISTIC</th>
<th>WT</th>
<th>IDEAL</th>
<th>WORST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Awareness and recognition of mature students’ domestic commitments</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Empathy e.g. plenty of notice for exam timetables; exam re-takes allowed if children are sick; understanding you are not available at the drop of a hat; sympathetic timetabling to accommodate school drop off and to reduce overall number of trips in for those living off campus; flexibility about the location where work takes place; and consistent use of u-learn and audio recording to allow remote study</td>
<td>Not communicating ahead of time; singling you out for being late and telling you this is unacceptable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Identification of specific skills gaps and opportunities to address these, with awareness about students who have arrived at university through non-traditional routes</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>One-to-one meeting with academic tutor to fill out a questionnaire assessing this; these issues addressed up front and revisited later; skills training sessions available to fill the gaps</td>
<td>Lack of identification of skills gaps leads to not doing as well as you could; huge stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Availability of a calm and respectful learning environment, with clear boundaries for all; and lecturers taking responsibility for this (allied with accessibility of learning resources and flexibility of provision)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Knowing you can come to the University and resources will be there with a suitable place to study and that lectures will be calm and quiet</td>
<td>Not enough resources; noisy and disruptive working environment; nowhere to sit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Facilitation of social opportunities</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>When someone starts they are made aware of the Mature Students Society; there are opportunities to meet other mature students from the same faculty and a dedicated common room to facilitate this; the Mature Student Society is allowed to communicate with other students using the general email list.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Recognition and acknowledgement of student's professional background, experience, individuality and commitment, and respect for this with a partnership approach</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>From Day 1, staff take time out to get to know you; there are sessions for staff to familiarise themselves with students' backgrounds and students are encouraged to introduce themselves.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Supportiveness and helpfulness of attitude</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Open door policy and time available; students feel understood and listened to and know who to go to for help.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Accuracy of information about what is required</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>People give you the right answer quickly or direct you to someone who knows. If they can't answer they acknowledge your query. Website information is up to date and reading lists are issued before the semester starts.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

E = Reasonable expectations; P = Perceptions of current provision; \( \text{=} \) Score overlap; Score of 1 = Worst; Score of 10 = Ideal

No facility for communication; lack of integration; isolation and no specific space for mature students.

Being lumped in; conflict from staff feeling threatened by student's experience, staff being mean and not understanding.

“You’re an adult learner, so go and find out for yourself!”

Wrong information or far too late to make a difference; out of date information on the website.
Figure 6: Template from Support Staff Workshop
“The support mature students need from the University to enable them to undertake their studies well”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHARACTERISTIC</th>
<th>WT</th>
<th>IDEAL</th>
<th>WORST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Accuracy / timeliness of information</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>All information within 3 months of starting course including timetabling and extra opportunities if sessions are missed (flexible delivery)</td>
<td>No information whatsoever</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Pre-entry management of expectations</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Clarity with a human touch e.g. a buddy scheme / mentoring are included as elements of what students are offered pre-entry. Prospective students are given access to a money adviser. Advice offered is centrally coordinated and flexibly delivered</td>
<td>False promises; support never appears; advice is misleading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Appropriateness / sensitivity of staff in relation to mature students e.g. with respect to age</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Treatment based on individual</td>
<td>Staff ask group of students to give their ages or assume mature student must be member of staff; ageism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Feedback: level and frequency, timeliness, clarity &amp; detail</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Feedback provided on work with 3-week turn around and delivered in a timely way that enables students to making informed decisions; feedback is embedded in that it is relevant to learning goals; feedback is clear and specific</td>
<td>9 weeks without feedback, despite assignments being submitted on an ongoing basis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Flexibility of learning support provided in terms of convenience / timing</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Virtual support available 24:7</td>
<td>Unanswered help lines (British Gas!)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Appropriateness / tailor-made quality of induction in covering key issues of relevance to mature students e.g. pre-entry days that are dedicated to mature students / also appropriateness of literature</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Personalised, with ability to deliver by a variety of methods e.g. students able to choose from a menu of options that include issues-based material with appropriate issues covered, such as council tax &amp; childcare</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Communication of partnership ethos that values learners as individuals</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Ethos enshrined in policy &amp; procedure: University values include mention of mutual respect; people talk of ‘a community of learners’ that includes both students and staff</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Approachability of support staff</td>
<td></td>
<td>Support staff are welcoming, available, understanding, non-judgemental and inclusive</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Availability of needs analysis in an academic context</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Curriculum is clear on skills needed and knowledge-base required; opportunities for support to plug the gaps in skills / knowledge are generally available and also clear</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Lightness, sociability &amp; acceptability of stress interventions</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Opportunities for open and inclusive support groups, with a mix of peer and professional support. Examples of light / sociable opportunities now include stress-busting sessions (offered by Centre for Wellbeing), mature student cafe at induction events</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

E = Reasonable expectations; P = Perceptions of current provision; = Score overlap; Score of 1 = Worst; Score of 10 = Ideal
Figure 7: Template from Academic Staff Workshop

“The support mature students need from the University to enable them to undertake their studies well”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHARACTERISTIC</th>
<th>WT</th>
<th>IDEAL</th>
<th>WORST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Quality of communication in terms of its:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A: Timeliness</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
<td>Students receive no response to emails</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Staff respond on the day even if to say that they are passing query on</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B: Empathy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Decision and no explanation e.g. “Regret to inform you the answer is no”; “You’ve chosen your module, you can’t change”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Staff demonstrate understanding in tone of emails; use of follow up phone calls; chats over tea/coffee; checking if understood</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C: Accuracy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wrong information e.g. special needs student sent to wrong room; different messages from different people; directed to website at dead link; need to hunt to find information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>All information accurate and consistent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D: Appropriate targeting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Spam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Protection from spam; a chance to opt in or opt out of receiving information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Support in preparation for university in terms of study skills and induction into tacit knowledge</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A: Support in study skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No provision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g. IT, writing in academic environment, essays, accessing literature, support in unfamiliar ways of working</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>University, as well as providing academic modules, provides key skills sessions in a formalised way ahead of starting course and targeted at mature students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B: Induction into the University's tacit knowledge, including explanations of expectations of staff and of what students can expect</td>
<td>Structured programme, targeted towards mature students, including explanations of expectations of staff and what students can expect</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Flexibility in delivery of Support</td>
<td>Support services available at weekends; heating on for weekend classes; support provided in a way which is responsive to individual need e.g. provision of late sessions</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Availability of emotional Support</td>
<td>Students feel able and willing to access support: focused sessions provided by the Centre for Wellbeing with some specifically for mature students; there are efforts to de-pathologise support (e.g. recent poetry sessions) and some sessions provided in buildings that are remote from the main campus</td>
<td>E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Opportunities for interaction and integration</td>
<td>Academic programme has early opportunities for group work; there are social events and small group tutorials</td>
<td>E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Availability of appropriate accommodation, particularly with reference to noise level</td>
<td>Students have the option of designated accommodation that is quiet</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nothing, plus the assumption made that you have just left home e.g. through comments implying that you are shopping / doing washing for first time; mature students given a sense of not belonging

Everything shut outside working hours and no willingness to do special sessions

Total isolation; no one to turn to; “nobody is interested in me and my problems”

Individual work and so no opportunities for small groups or socialising; segregation of mature students leading to isolation where there are not many on course

---

E = Reasonable expectations; P = Perceptions of current provision; $\square$ = Score overlap; Score of 1 = Worst; Score of 10 = Ideal
Table 2 gives an overview of the themes and issues arising in each workshop. Each theme is discussed briefly below.

1. **Accuracy and timeliness of information/communication**

Accuracy/clarity and timeliness of information was a characteristic identified by all four workshops. It was also the characteristic given greatest weight by both staff workshops and one of the mature student workshops (M1), while the second student workshop (M2), which gave less weight to accuracy, saw the provision of advance information as contributing to their first priority: that staff should show an awareness and recognition of mature students’ domestic commitments. Both student workshops, in fact, placed accuracy and timeliness in the context of allowing for planning in relation to their wider lives. Students specifically flagged up advance notice of exam timetables and course timetables; provision of reading lists ahead of the semester; promptness of staff in acknowledging and responding to queries or redirecting queries where appropriate; and availability of up-to-date website information. Some of the same issues were also highlighted in staff workshops. One of the student workshops and both staff workshops emphasised the need for clarity about what was expected of students. Support staff particularly focused on the quality of feedback, in terms of its level, frequency, timeliness, clarity and detail, though it was not clear that this issue had specific implications for mature students.

In terms of expectations and perceptions, clarity/accuracy and timeliness of communication was an area where all the workshops thought there was a wide range in current performance. However, while academic staff and mature students considered reasonable expectations were met some of the time, support staff were more critical: they considered it was reasonable to expect course information three months in advance, and that the University currently underperformed in this area. It is worth noting that throughout their workshop, the support staff set the highest ‘reasonable expectations’ of the four groups, placing these at 10 in every case – a probable reflection of a shared ideal about the standard of support that they sought to provide.

2. **Suitability of University facilities in meeting the needs of mature students**

While all four workshops focused on some issues related to University facilities, this was a particular concern for the student workshops, and was partly associated with difficulties arising from living some distance off campus. A view expressed in the first student workshop was that food and stationery on campus was relatively expensive and that mature students, as a captive market, lacked places to retreat to and would benefit from tea and coffee making facilities, access to a microwave and more affordable goods. Both student workshops also suggested that there was a need for a dedicated mature student venue or common room to facilitate social opportunities (discussed separately below). The second student workshop wanted sympathetic
timetabling to reduce the overall number of trips into university for those living off campus, and to accommodate the school drop off.

All the workshops talked about the importance of flexibility of provision. The first student workshop saw flexibility – e.g. in the provision of support services and in arrangements for the delivery of course work – as an acknowledgement of competing demands in mature students’ wider lives. Inflexibility was characterised as a tight schedule coupled with a ‘take it or leave it approach’. Both the staff workshops also identified flexibility in the delivery of support as an important characteristic, with academics focusing on the availability of out-of-hours services and special catch-up sessions; and support staff focusing on 24:7 virtual support and responsive help-lines. In a similar vein, the second student workshop emphasised flexibility about where work took place, with consistent use of u-learn and audio recording to allow remote study.

Another issue raised by this group was the availability of a calm and respectful learning environment, both in terms of lectures and places to study. On this characteristic the group saw a clear gap between their reasonable expectations and their perceptions of what was on offer, which erred towards being noisy and disruptive.

The academics were the only group to focus on the availability of designated quiet accommodation for mature students living on campus.

3. **Empathy and awareness in staff-student relations**

All the groups focused on the quality of student-staff relations. Support staff emphasised that staff should behave with appropriateness and sensitivity, and have the awareness to avoid outright ageism or any comments that might make students feel ill at ease; and that support staff should ideally be welcoming, understanding and inclusive. Academic staff emphasised the need to demonstrate empathy and understanding in the tone of communication, which would ideally include follow up phone calls, chats over tea and coffee and checking whether they were understood, and at worst involve decisions given without an explanation.

The student workshops also identified supportiveness and helpfulness as important. They wanted to feel understood and listened to and to know who to go to (M2) and to have support from an allocated tutor with mature student awareness (M1). While students considered these to be reasonable expectations, they perceived that they were often not met.

As touched on earlier, the student workshops also focused specifically on staff awareness and recognition of students’ domestic commitments and wider life needs. Issues raised in this context included allowing exam re-takes if children are sick and understanding that students were “not available at the drop of a hat”. In addition, the second student workshop highlighted recognition and acknowledgement of students’ professional background, experience, individuality and commitment and respect for
this with a partnership approach (M2). They felt that staff should ideally familiarise themselves with students’ backgrounds and encourage students to introduce themselves in these terms, though there was considerable variation in the extent to which such expectations were met. At worst, it was suggested, there might be conflict from staff feeling threatened by students’ experience. The support staff workshop also espoused communication of a partnership ethos in which both staff and students were viewed as an inclusive community of learners.

4. Availability of initial needs analysis and opportunities to address gaps in skills and knowledge

This was an area where there was a strong consensus between the different workshops. All four agreed on the importance of support in addressing gaps in specific skills needed for study. Both student workshops and support staff saw a need for an initial needs analysis to identify skills gaps and the opportunities to address them in an academic context. This was given relatively high precedence by both student workshops, which made this their second most important characteristic, and which both saw a distinct gap between reasonable expectations and perceived provision in this area.

5. Adequacy of induction

Both staff groups and one of the student groups (M1) highlighted the quality of the induction process and argued for a tailored package for mature students, with information relevant to their needs. Academic staff thought this would ideally operate as an induction into the University’s tacit knowledge, including explanations of what students could expect. Support staff suggested that students would ideally be able to choose from a menu of options that included relevant information on issues such as council tax and childcare. They also saw potential problems where there was ambivalence in providing materials to mature students because of embarrassment about the appropriate terms. Students suggested recognising the needs of the mature student community with a specific question and answer session and backing up sessions with pages on the intranet and in hard copy. Induction was another area where participants saw a distinct gap between reasonable expectations and perceived provision.

6. Opportunities for sociability

All four workshops gave some consideration to sociability, but this was accorded much greater relative prominence by the two mature student workshops. Both of these wanted the University to facilitate opportunities for mature students to meet other mature students. Proposals for achieving this included a social programme maintained by the University; a dedicated common room for meeting mature students from the same faculty; and mature students being routinely made aware of the Mature Student Society. There appeared to be a problem for the society in communicating with its
potential members in the wider student body, and it was argued that it should have access to the general email list to do this. For both mature student workshops, the opportunity to socialise with other mature students was the characteristic where there was the greatest disparity between perceptions and expectations. There was a strong desire for recognition that mature students needed these opportunities rather than simply being expected to “mingle”.

The academic workshop, in contrast, highlighted the importance of emotional support, with specific reference to sessions run by the Centre for Wellbeing and opportunities for interaction and integration. They suggested that it would be beneficial to introduce opportunities early in the academic programme for group work, social events and small group tutorials. Consequently they placed more emphasis on integration of mature students with other students in general. Support staff recognised this issue by highlighting the role of “open and inclusive support groups, with a mix of peer and professional support”. Both academic and support staff valued the provision of light and sociable stress interventions run by the Centre for Wellbeing, which were seen as de-pathologising the need for emotional support.

- All the groups emphasised the importance of accurate and timely information, and mature students saw this in the context of their need to reconcile study with demands in their wider lives. They wanted advance notice of course timetables; exam timetables and reading lists;
- There was a general desire for flexibility in provision, including flexibility about the location where work takes place, with support for remote study;
- There was dissatisfaction with the quality of the learning environment, related to noise and disruption in lectures and study areas;
- There was wide agreement on the need for helpful and supportive staff who would make students feel listened to and understood;
- Mature students wanted awareness and recognition of the domestic commitments competing for their time; and respect for their professional background and experience in the context of a partnership approach;
- There was support for a more targeted induction programme for mature students;
- There was particular consensus around the value of an academic needs analysis with opportunities to address skills gaps;
- Mature students gave greater relative precedence to the need for opportunities to meet other mature students and wanted the University to facilitate this with a venue on campus and a social programme.
Table 2: Comparison of themes and issues from workshops

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme/issue</th>
<th>Inclusion in workshop:</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mature student 1; Mature student 2</td>
<td>Support staff; Academic Staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M 1</td>
<td>M 2</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Accuracy and timeliness of information</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promptness of staff in responding to emails</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Timetabling provided in advance of course</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Plenty of notice for exam timetables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading lists issued ahead of semester</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clarity in expectations of students and skills needed</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Website information kept up to date</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frequency, timeliness, clarity and detail of feedback</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Suitability of University facilities in meeting the needs of mature students</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of common room/venue/facilities to support those not living on campus e.g. tea and coffee making</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Calm and respectful learning environment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Flexibility about where work takes place and consistent use of u-learn and audio recording to allow remote study</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>24-hour virtual support</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Flexibility of learning support re. convenience and timing</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sympathetic timetabling to reduce overall number of trips in for those living off campus; to accommodate school drop off</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Availability of appropriate accommodation (for those living on campus) particularly with reference to noise level</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Empathy and awareness in staff-student relations</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help with work from a tutor allocated to you who has mature student awareness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriateness and sensitivity in relation to mature students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness and recognition of mature students’ domestic commitments/wider life needs</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition and acknowledgement of each student’s professional background, experience, individuality and commitment</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication of a partnership ethos</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff operate open door policy with time available</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff demonstrate understanding in tone of emails; use of follow up phone calls; chats over coffee; checking back</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support staff welcoming, available, understanding, non-judgemental and inclusive</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Availability of initial needs analysis and opportunities to address gaps in skills and knowledge</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum clear on skills needed and knowledge base required</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial needs analysis to identify skills gaps, carried out at one-to-one meeting with academic tutor</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support in study skills to address the gaps</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adequacy of induction</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tailor made induction package for mature students covering key issues of specific relevance to them</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Induction into the University’s tacit knowledge, including expectations of staff and of what students can expect</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Opportunities for sociability</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mature students made aware of Mature Student Society</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedicated mature student common room facilities/venue</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to meet other mature students from same faculty</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programme to facilitate mature student contact maintained by the University</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for group work/social events/small group tutorials</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional support/peer support through light and sociable stress interventions</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
At the subsequent brainstorming workshop, participants in the three mixed groups put forward the following agendas for change:

**Group 1**

- Improved and earlier information cascade – e.g. exam timetables; academic timetables and associated information to be sent out earlier;
- One-to-one identification of skills gaps and more classes to address these. To support this, the introduction of a compulsory Personal Development Plan with an ongoing review;
- A venue giving opportunities to integrate with other mature students on different courses, plus staff-led opportunities to integrate;
- Provision of support staff with empathy and experience of mature students and staff training to equip academic and support staff in dealing with mature students’ welfare;
- The identification of best practice University-wide to improve standards.

**Group 2**

At pre-entry:
- Transparency of course requirements and a clear path to develop skills if needed (including IT);
- Management of expectations – e.g. with a learning contract;
- Information timeline – stating when timetables will be available etc.

At induction:
- Tailor made/targeted/self-selection ‘menu’ of options;
- Contact from Day 1 with the Mature Student Society;
- Study skills – appropriate sessions.

On an ongoing basis:
- Network of other mature students;
- Study skills development opportunities delivered flexibly – in timing and nature;
- Consistent widespread use of virtual tools – e.g. u-learn;
- Feedback – clear on when received;
- Designated area for mature students on campus;
• Timely/accurate/empathic communications.

In the University culture:
• Greater mature student awareness;
• Greater consideration from Registry (plus communication of delivery expectation);
• Effective learning environment.

Group 3

• Mature student common room – providing support from others, somewhere quiet to study, a kettle;
• Organisation/management improvements – e.g. early timetables for exams, rescheduled lectures notified by text;
• Accurate recognition of mature students’ skills – both to decide whether there is a need for further skills training and to respond positively where mature students have an advantage;
• At the evaluation and feedback stage: the ability to self-identify as a mature student (may not be applicable to those aged 21 years old);
• Recognise that there are links between the needs of mature students and other groups – e.g. students with disabilities and international students;
• Address lack of knowledge among staff about where mature students are coming from – e.g. through different qualifications such as Access courses;
• Nominate a mature student ‘champion’ on the staff – more permanent than a champion who is a student. This would be someone who has relevant knowledge, can be a point of contact, knows about Access courses and can offer liaison for staff and for students.

These proposals include a number of concrete solutions – e.g. a mature student champion; a venue for mature students; identification of skills gaps supported by the introduction of Personal Development Plans; learning contracts and information timelines – whilst also highlighting areas for improvement, such as staff awareness, information cascade and consistency in the use of virtual tools. The output from the brainstorm has been used to inform recommendations at the end of this report.
Interviews with mature students

While the workshops made it possible to consult mature students directly about the type of support they considered important, a series of interviews with mature students provided a more personal perspective on their experience of university life. The interviews also made it possible to capture a diverse range of experience, reflecting the heterogeneity of mature students as a group. These accounts and reflections offered insights into the contexts in which support is sought or received.

Lifeline interviews

The ‘draw a lifeline’ technique, developed by Hopson & Scally (2009), helps interviewees to create a visual narrative that serves as a helpful focus in describing their university experience. Making use of this tool, the interviews followed a three-stage process:

- After a brief introduction to the project, participants were asked to provide some basic information about themselves: their age, course, educational background, working background, whether living on or off campus and who they shared their home with (e.g. partner and children).

- It was then explained that the project wanted to look at ‘the highs and lows of university life’. Participants were given a large sheet of paper and some felt pens, and asked to “draw a lifeline” to represent their university life. They were told that they could use any colours, and that they should decide for themselves the shape of the line and at what point in time it started or finished. They were asked to mark on to the line key events and happenings in their university experience, starting with the earlier events and moving to the present. Once they had drawn this lifeline, they were asked to help the interviewer to understand this, using a series of symbols handed to them on a sheet. The symbols included high points; low points; stressful points; points when the participant asked for help; points when help was received; points when someone was helpful; a point when a choice was made; a point when the participant felt they had no choice; a point when a risk was taken.

- Having completed the drawing, participants were asked to sum up the lifeline in one or two sentences. They were then asked to say what characterised their ‘peak’ and ‘trough’ experiences; what they had learnt from these; where they had gone for assistance, what help had been forthcoming; what help would they would have liked; and whether there was anything they would like to change.
They were also asked about what they had hoped to get out of going to university and whether they felt their university experience was going to deliver this.\(^4\)

Participants were recruited via the Mature Student Society; posters around campus and a notice in a University e-newsletter. In all, 18 participants were interviewed in two batches. Interviewees were aged from 26 to 63, and included two in their 20s, six in their 30s, four in their 40s, five in their 50s and one in her 60s. There were 15 women and three men. There was representation from four faculties, with three from Management & Law; three from Engineering & Physical Sciences; two from Health & Medical Sciences; and 10 from Arts & Humanities (of which three were arts students and seven from social sciences). Among the interviewees, there were 11 undergraduates (of which four were in their first year; five in their second year; and two in their third year); three MSc students; three PhD students and one former PhD student who had withdrawn from her PhD and was now able to look back on her student experience.

All participants were given an information sheet about the project and signed consent forms before being interviewed. For the first batch of eight participants, interviews were recorded in detailed note form. For the second batch of 10 participants interviews were recorded using a voice recorder and responses fully transcribed, in order to allow for the more extensive use of verbatim quotations.

The analysis sought:

- To understand causes of stress for mature students, particularly where stressful events appear to jeopardise a positive overall experience or a successful outcome;
- To examine students’ positive and negative perceptions about the support available;
- To identify any specific suggestions made by students about the support they would have liked to have had\(^5\);
- To relate the experience of our interviewees to key themes in the earlier literature.

**Findings**

As in the wider literature, many of the participants had begun their courses with some doubts about their own abilities. For some their subsequent experience as a mature

\(^4\) These questions were only introduced for the second batch of interviewees.
\(^5\) Three of the interviewees also participated in the workshops, and we were at pains to avoid the study ‘double weighting’ recommendations from these interviewees that had also arisen through the workshops.
Understanding the support needs of mature students, Newson, McDowall & Saunders

student was a difficult but rewarding journey towards greater confidence and an increasing sense of themselves as a successful learner. These narratives closely resembled those described by Walters (2000), in that students saw themselves on a positive trajectory, made new discoveries about themselves and envisaged new opportunities. The stress in getting to grips with the demands of the course was seen as a necessary part of meeting the challenge: “If it’s not stressful then it means you don’t care” (Undergraduate, early 30s).

For others, in contrast, the academic outcome was more uncertain and their student experience appeared to be more like the ongoing struggle suggested by Leathwood & O’Connell (2003). As in that study, this was exacerbated by a variety of problems experienced by individual students, which here included a perceived lack of support from teaching staff, misinformation, financial pressure and accommodation difficulties. For those coping successfully with academic work, there could still be a sense of struggle generated by the level of workload, together with difficulties of combining work with family commitments. Other problems revolved around feelings of social isolation and loneliness.

Consequently the lifelines and interviews reveal difficulties in a variety of areas, which may either detract from the mature student experience, or seriously disrupt it. Below are discussed the key themes that emerged, with a particular focus on the potential sources of stress and the assistance sought and received by students in dealing with these.

1. Adjusting to the academic demands of university life

Perhaps unsurprisingly, exams, coursework and workload were the commonest causes of stress recorded on mature student lifelines, and adjusting to the demands of university life could be difficult. Particular problems arose where students found themselves poorly prepared for higher education, for example, because they had taken a less traditional route into education, or because they were much less familiar with the current study culture. Participant 12, an undergraduate in her 40s, returning to study after raising a family, described her complete confusion in coming to understand the role of IT:

“No one told me the summer before going to uni. I had no idea, I didn’t know how to copy or paste, I didn’t even know what Word is. I thought essays would still be handwritten. I wasn’t in the core group, I was ten years older than any other mature student. I didn’t know what I didn’t know. When I asked, SPLASH sent me to IT and they sent me links to tutorials on the computer but I was not familiar with the terminology and words. It was a terrible experience”

Given a requirement to submit coursework in word processed form, this participant found herself putting in considerably more time than anticipated in order to bring her
skills up to date. In addition to the burden of the additional work she found the experience extremely uncomfortable at a social level: “The stress was horrendous – they thought I am a mad lady, which is humiliating.” The issue of students feeling humiliated or otherwise treated in a way they find inappropriate or disrespectful, is one to which we return later. This participant’s experience provides a clear illustration of the kind of problems that might be overcome with some advance needs analysis and appropriate preparatory training.

For Participant 13, a student from Eastern Europe in his late 20s, the problem of catching up with material he had not studied before was compounded by miscommunication. Having been told that there was no preparatory reading, and that he would be allocated to a group according to his level through a test at the start of the course, he subsequently learnt that all the groups operated at the same level, with no additional facilitation for those needing to cover extra ground. He found himself struggling throughout the first semester, which was dominated by revision to the exclusion of any social life, together with painful doubts about his own ability:

“In the beginning, I felt stupid. In the lectures they kept saying ‘You should know this formula from your A-levels’ and that blocked my mind and I focused on the points that I didn’t know”.

The comment illustrates how an erroneous assumption, that everyone has followed the same previous educational path, can in itself be undermining. While this student managed to get “back on track”, it seems likely that a good deal of this stress might have been avoided with more constructive advice prior to entry and more systematic recognition of the diversity in educational backgrounds amongst students accepted on to the course.

This point is elaborated by Participant 10, an MSc student in her early 40s. For her, meeting the course requirements had become a protracted struggle, in which she felt undermined by the lack of confidence in her abilities communicated to her by academic staff. Looking back at the lifeline she had drawn she felt much more should have been done at a very early stage to recognise the potential problems she might face on the grounds of her educational background:

“Because you know, if you interview somebody for an hour and you find out from their paperwork what qualifications they’ve got, where their background is and all their history, you are going to know at this point: ‘Right, P hasn’t done a degree, she could be struggling, so if we give her the support she needs, and all the pointers, and say you need to think about this, and you need to think about this, and you need to think about this, and my office door is open any time via email’, I’m going to feel really confident”
What this suggests is a failure in the psychological contract (Rousseau, 1996), comprised of unwritten promises and expectations between two parties (more commonly invoked in the context of employment, but readily applicable in education). Students accepted on the basis of non-traditional qualifications may naturally expect that the University either deems them adequately equipped for study or else intends to fully support them in bridging this gap. For the participants above at least, the extent to which these expectations were met was variable. While several participants in the study made use of SPLASH, the library Learning and Support service, a key issue appeared to be the opportunity to identify and address problems in advance, so that they did not add excessively to students’ workload and the general pressure of adjustment at the start of the course.

Regardless of skills gaps, and in line with McKenzie & Gow’s study (2004), participants generally appeared to approach their studies very conscientiously, with some reporting that the pressure of work effectively dominated their lives.

“I feel like for 10-11 weeks I give up my other life completely – no gym, no friends, no parents. My life does become more like maths, especially during term time”
(Undergraduate, early 30s)

“every minute that I have I have to be studying. Maybe that’s me, maybe I’m too conscientious or too whatever, but nevertheless it’s completely took over my life”
(MSc student, 40s)

Pressure of work was exacerbated by conflicting family responsibilities. Participant 6, who had begun a PhD in her 40s, at a time when she had a two-year-old child, had ultimately withdrawn because of the drain on family commitments. She had felt unable to resolve these problems without studying part-time, which had not been an option, because her funding was based on full-time study. Pressure on mature students combining work and family was also more acute because of the logistics of living away from campus. Participant 8, studying for an MSc in her 40s, found that commuting three times a week encroached significantly on her study time, adding to an already heavy workload. She suggested that in this, the timetabling had been unhelpful, in that sessions were spread through the week, necessitating more travel. This left her feeling that, although she was studying for a postgraduate degree, these arrangements were geared more towards young people and those living on campus. Conversely, another participant who had previously taken a different masters course at Surrey on a part-time basis, commented that the timetable structure enabled her to cover all the sessions in one day a week, making the course much more accessible to mature students who were combining study with work or needed to set up childcare arrangements.
Staff flexibility around study arrangements could be an important factor in alleviating study stress. For Participant 16, an undergraduate in her early 30s, who had a disability, the pressure of travelling added to a struggle with memory problems and fatigue and by the end of her first semester she was planning to quit. However, she was dissuaded by staff with the offer of help and an agreement that she need not attend all the lectures, and could instead receive copies of the material.

While the accounts illustrated the additional challenges faced by mature students, some interviewees emphasised that their previous life experience made them better equipped to tackle their studies effectively:

“I think a lot of that is having a work ethic, I try and view university as a full-time job, so I get up early, and I’m thinking about what I need to read and er, so, but talking to my younger counterparts, I don’t think that they see it that way at all”

(Undergraduate, early 30s)

“I think with experience of sort of real work for many, many years, I’m in a much better place to do a PhD now, and compared to students who are starting fresh from college I’m at a great advantage”

(PhD student, 30s)

It was also interesting that although mature students faced conflicting demands from their academic and home lives, two interviewees clearly viewed their studies as a positive counterpoint to stressful events that they were dealing with at home. Participant 5, an undergraduate in her early 50s, who was coping with divorce, a house sale, and her mother’s illness, used a striking metaphor to illustrate the relationship. She explained that she thought of her life as a jar of stones, in which the stones were all the things she had to deal with at home, while her university course was like water being poured between them. She felt that she was well able to keep her studies in perspective, against the life changing events taking place in parallel. As discussed in Section 3 below, reconciling the demands of university work with stressful home events was made easier by understanding and flexibility on the part of teaching staff.

- Exams, coursework and workload were the commonest causes of stress recorded on mature student lifelines, and adjusting to the demands of university life could be difficult;
- Particular problems arose where students found themselves poorly prepared for their courses, pointing to the need for early needs analysis and appropriate skills training;
• Students generally appeared conscientious and some found that the pressure of work dominated their lives, a problem that could be exacerbated by domestic commitments;
• Accommodating timetabling and staff flexibility over study arrangements were both helpful in ameliorating work pressure;
• Some students felt their past experience made them better equipped to meet academic challenges, as compared with school leavers;
• Study could offer a positive counterpoint to stressful events at home.

2. Relationships with other students

After problems related to work pressure, social issues, including a sense of social disengagement were the most common source of stress. At worst, participants felt lonely and isolated. Participant 17, embarking on an undergraduate course in her sixties, commented that “here at Surrey, everything is for the young.” Participant 18, an undergraduate in his 30s, had been reticent about making friends through concern that he would burden younger students with “hanging out with the old guy”. Living off campus, he found the lack of social contacts all the more difficult: “I come in and I don’t have the friends all the others have and I have nowhere to go in-between lectures”. However, loneliness could also be an acute problem for those living on site: Participant 15, an undergraduate in her 50s living away from her husband and friends, said she had not realised she would miss them all so much. She wanted more social contact but felt excluded from student gatherings by not being on Facebook. Participant 1, an international student studying for an MSc in his early 30s, and also living in University accommodation, described a strong sense of alienation. His account concurs with Leder & Fogasz’ finding (2004), that loneliness can be a particular issue for mature students arriving from overseas:

“It’s like an emotional trauma, where being alone among people [...] I think many of the mature students have that. They feel useless, yeah, among people. Because they can’t relate to, they can’t talk much. So they stand aloof kind of. [...] They would like to be among, but it’s difficult. Yeah. So they feel insecure. It’s like a pain, but it’s an emotional pain. [...] The after-effects will be there even after you go to your room. So you, the next time something even comes you try to avoid that because, why do you want to suffer that much?”

This student argued that many international students come to the UK for exposure to the culture rather than just a degree, but find themselves struggling with social isolation. In his own case, he had managed to overcome this through helping other students with their studies and joining societies.
Other participants, while aware of their somewhat detached social position as a mature student, appeared bemused rather than distressed by it. Participant 5, an undergraduate in her early 50s, combined a positive view of her younger peers with an acceptance of difference.

“Well it’s always a little bit odd, cos you know it’s not like you can talk about what you did in Wates last night and stuff cos you weren’t there, but you wouldn’t have wanted to be there either. [...] But they’re very– you can talk to them about the course and everything else, and they’re nice, they’re all very nice kids, and they’re only, what, a few years older than my daughter is, so it’s quite nice to be kept in touch with that generation, just slightly ahead of where she is, and how they think, and what they want to do and everything”

Participant 2, an undergraduate in her early 30s, also described the oddness of her situation and a sense of being stuck in a “weird limbo land” between her established peer group and the younger student community:

“I live away from campus. I don’t socialise. I never socialise with the younger ones. And I wouldn’t find that particularly fun either. At the same time, I don’t have a lot in common with my own age friends, cos they’re all, you know, hard work, mortgages, children [...] I feel quite stuck in the middle a lot of the time. It’s a very strange place to be”

Despite some interviewees describing feelings of loneliness or oddness, participants did not in general imply that they had had especially problematic relationships with younger students and some mentioned being pleasantly surprised to be accepted: “nobody shied away to be my partner for group work” (Undergraduate, 40s).

There were two exceptions to this. One was a participant in her 50s who had had a very negative experience with younger (though also mature) students at a previous university, but had been greatly relieved to find friendly relationships with younger students on her course at Surrey. This student also talked about the need for mature students to be sensitive about their own behaviour in relation to younger students. Having had contact with younger students in another context, she was particularly aware of negative perceptions associated with older learners, and at pains to avoid them by not “jumping in”:

“I’d heard from the other side of the fence, from the students I’d met in the gym who said ‘We have awful mature students who think they know everything.’ So I thought fine, ok, you know, this is interesting, because I come to this position: I’ve never studied [this subject] before. So what about all this life experience. What’s it going to add to this? Little – so let’s just leave that behind me, shed it.”
Over time she had become more confident about making her own contributions, but nevertheless remained aware of a need for restraint. This suggests that seminar leaders drawing on the experience of mature learners, as recommended by Tones et al. (2009), need also to exercise skill and sensitivity to ensure these contributions are seen to be measured and relevant. This may be all the more challenging in situations where younger students are more reluctant to contribute to discussions, as one of our other participants had found.

The second instance of problematic relationships between mature students and their school leaver peers was described by a younger mature student in her mid 20s, who was living in University accommodation. Despite the relatively small age gap between her and her flatmates, she struggled to cope with their very different expectations of campus life:

“Therefore, I didn’t study as much as I could have because I wanted to get used to being at university and get to know people and settle in. But now I really want to study and work hard, but it’s really difficult because the people, the rest of my flatmates still go out a lot and they keep me awake basically, 3, 4-o’clock in the morning. They’re just really loud. […] I’ve been run down and unhappy because of that.”

The solution this student wanted was to be housed with other mature students who were prepared to live a quieter life.

Many mature students made it clear that they sought and valued contact with other mature students. One participant was disappointed not to be studying alongside more mature students on the course she was taking, which had emphasised its suitability for people with professional experience in its promotional literature. Several participants talked about the desirability of having a place on campus where mature students could meet each other and two said they would have liked the Mature Student Society to be more active. However, it appeared that the society’s current programme was less suited to the needs of younger mature students in their 20s, such as Participant 3, who had been disappointed to find the main focus on chats with tea and coffee, when she would have preferred more outings. She reflected that the needs of younger mature students were slightly different from those that had children. She also felt that the introductory session held by the society would have benefited from more structure with games or other activities to help break the ice. Another concern was that the society’s events were communicated via email to all those who had joined at the start of the year, paying a small membership fee. Students who were not sure at this stage whether this was for them, were thereby left out of the email loop, and so less likely to be aware of the society’s ongoing activities and to have the chance to opt in to them at a later stage.
• Social issues, including a sense of social disengagement, were the second most common source of stress, leading some interviewees to feel lonely and isolated;
• Some students, while accepting their more detached position and not expecting to socialise with other students, still commented on the oddness of their situation;
• For the most part interviewees’ relationships with younger students did not appear to be problematic in an antagonistic way;
• One participant had found it difficult to share accommodation with younger students on campus because of their louder, more nocturnal lifestyles;
• Another talked about a need to hold back in seminar discussions, in sensitivity to negative perceptions among younger students about mature students who “think they know everything”;
• Mature students valued and sought social contact with other mature students, and wanted a venue for this purpose;
• The Mature Student Society may be better geared to the needs of older mature students than younger ones.

3. Student perceptions of support

Interviewees had both positive and negative perceptions about academic support from teaching staff. These included some very favourable comments about the standard of teaching:

“the tutor was amazing. I mean she just made me send her a draft and she’d respond really, really quickly with really constructive comments”

(Undergraduate, early 50s)

“There are three lecturers that I can think of that have been phenomenal in their teaching skills, in that they’ve shown an art in many different styles of teaching”

(MSc student, early 40s)

Students particularly valued receiving prompt and helpful academic support via email, and were correspondingly frustrated by a lack of response.

Teaching staff were often responsible for helping mature students to accommodate work requirements when dealing with serious problems at home, and this was also an
area where a sympathetic and flexible approach was greatly appreciated, for example, in allowing coursework to be handed in late or exams to be sat again at a later date.

Most of the frustrations with academic support occurred where students felt that their needs were not being fully understood and recognised, particularly in relation to the value of their time. For example, Participant 6 explained that, as a PhD student she had struggled to locate various academic papers over a period of months and had asked her supervisor if any summaries were available but had been told that they were not. She was subsequently exasperated to discover that he was author to a set of books that provided the synopses she was searching for:

“There was just no appreciation that you had a child and childcare, you just didn’t have the hours to sit in the library and muse to yourself. You had to be more efficient than that.”

Participant 7, also a PhD student, argued that mature students were likely to have a lot of time management issues, and that teaching staff needed to be aware of this from an equality perspective:

“It’s like my supervisor thinking well, I’m really busy, and not sort of thinking ‘well maybe P is really busy as well, you know, and perhaps I do need to get back to her a bit sooner or something like that and acknowledge the emails’ – so I don’t think I’m shouting into the void.”

These concerns relate not only to students being under pressure, but to the implied lack of respect in taking another person’s time for granted. They prompt questions about the nature of the student-teacher relationship and how far it is implicitly understood as a hierarchy rather than a partnership. For a mature student, who may have accumulated years of experience in professional and family life, these questions are especially pertinent.

The issue is thrown into relief by a specific exchange related by one of the interviewees. In preparation for an early supervision meeting for her PhD, this student had sent her supervisors a written agenda, but had subsequently found that this caused tension. While she as a student considered she was being respectful of her supervisors’ time by setting out the ground she wanted to cover, her actions were interpreted as an attempt to take control of the process. The incident highlights the socially ambiguous territory that mature students have to negotiate. In this case an action that would widely be considered normal working practice was interpreted as inappropriately assertive.

The relationship had since evolved more positively, but the dynamics of this were complex. The student felt that in some respects her supervisors over-estimated her confidence. She suggested that it could be helpful if academics taking on the role of
supervisor found out more about their students’ educational and working backgrounds, and their lives generally, and also had a discussion at the outset about expectations on either side, so that the relationship could be more overtly negotiated from the beginning. For her own part she had anticipated a more mentoring and less end-focused form of supervision.

This was not the only example where students had discovered a mismatch between their expectations and the reality of academic support. Participant 12, an undergraduate in her 40s, had expected much more socialising between students and staff, with meetings and discussions in coffee shops. Having observed this in the university town where she had lived, she was disappointed to find that this did not take place. At her first meeting with her tutor she asked when they would meet to go to the pub, and was told “never”. Again this suggests that, since mature students may come into education with expectations and aspirations drawn from different settings and perhaps different eras, some exploration and negotiation of these relationships is needed.

Other frustrations related to miscommunication and mixed messages, a problem already touched on earlier. One participant appeared unclear on her position in relation to her studies, since she understood she had been pulled off her course after failing a module, but would still be able to take (or retake) all the individual modules and eventually gain the qualification. She said she had also received confusing and contradictory advice about her eligibility for joining certain modules, and very mixed messages from different academic staff about her own academic abilities and her potential for addressing her weaker areas. Poor communication, such as slow responses by staff to her emails, was perceived as a lack of care and support. Her relationship with staff running her course had become extremely stressful and she felt humiliated by her experience.

There were other instances where participants reported feeling personally exposed or emotionally diminished. Participant 12, an undergraduate in her 40s, argued that speaking out in tutorials carried greater potential embarrassment for a mature student than for a 19-year-old, because, while no one wanted to “look silly”, other students expected a mature student to know more. One participant was very discouraged by the negative tone of an academic she had asked for advice when she first considered applying for a higher degree. She reported feeling “very small and very worthless” after the conversation and had come away thinking that the application process would be “a complete waste of time”. She emphasised that she didn’t want unrealistic advice, but a more positive approach which she had appreciated in her dealings with other staff.

Clearly it is not desirable for any student to feel small and worthless, whatever their age. It is possible however that mature students are in a particularly vulnerable position in this regard. As has already been seen, they often lack confidence while setting
themselves high standards. They are entering into ambiguous social territory in which a
degree of deference normally accorded to their professional or life experience may be
over-ridden by the conventions of student-teacher relationships. They are willingly
submitting their performance to the evaluation of teachers who, while more expert in
some respects, may well have less experience in other spheres. They are attempting to
claim new life chances that, by and large, are thought of as opportunities for the young.
All this could be considered to be personally exposing; and, in line with Davies (2001), a
risky undertaking.

In addition to receiving academic support from teaching staff, interviewees had drawn
on many other different sources of assistance. These included Additional Learning
Support (ALS); Student Health Care; Student Advice; the Centre for Wellbeing; the
Student Learning Advice Team (SPLASH); pastoral support from a personal tutor;
departmental administrators; and support from peers (both mature students and other
students).

Participant 1 commented that it had been easy to find out about support from ALS
because this was generally well advertised on campus. ALS had provided help with time
management, planning for the future and writing and structuring assignments. He had
also particularly appreciated their help in accessing other services when, for example,
they referred him to Student Advice for financial assistance. Participant 11, an
undergraduate in her early 30s, emphasised the importance of actively seeking the
right kind of help at the right time: “the most stressful times were the ones where I was
not prepared, not confident about what to do. You have to be proactive in seeking the
support that is out there.”

A participant who had received pastoral support from a member of academic teaching
staff felt it would have been valuable to have had this from an earlier stage in her
course. These views, taken together, suggest that it is important that mature students
understand at an early stage what help is available from different services and how to
access this. This is likely to be especially applicable for skills training sessions required in
advance of study, when students are otherwise unfamiliar with University support
services.

- Interviewees had both positive and negative perceptions about academic support
  from teaching staff;
- There was appreciation for high standards of teaching; responsive academic
  support by email; and a sympathetic and flexible approach from staff in helping
  students to reconcile demands from study with demands in their home lives;
• Frustrations arose where students perceived a lack of understanding and respect for the fact that they were under time pressure and needed to adopt approaches to study that were time efficient;

• Interviewees’ accounts highlight that there is considerable potential for a mismatch in the expectations of academic support held by mature students and teaching staff. For this reason it could be helpful if academic staff overtly negotiated these expectations at the outset, and found out more about mature students’ previous work experiences and educational backgrounds;

• Participants occasionally reported feeling humiliated or emotionally diminished in relation to interactions with staff, pointing to the importance of staff adopting positive (though realistic) attitudes in their dealings with mature students;

• Interviewees had drawn on a wide range of support services, including Additional Learning Support (ALS); health staff; Student Advice; the Centre for Wellbeing; SPLASH; pastoral support from a member of academic staff; the Accommodation Office and departmental administrators. They had also drawn on support from peers, including both mature students and younger students;

• Mature students need to know at an early stage what help is available from different services and how to access this, so that they can be proactive in seeking the right kind of help at the right time.

4. Specific suggestions for improving support

Asked what kind of help they would have liked to have had, interviewees suggested a variety of specific recommendations for change, some of which have already been discussed in the sections above. Comments focused on the areas outlined below.

• Advance information: Suggestions included earlier provision of timetables to assist in planning, and reading lists to prepare for the course. It was also suggested that it would be helpful if the University communicated the purpose and value of induction – one participant said that, coming from abroad, he had not realised how useful this would be and had not attended. The same participant had understood from University information that it was easy to get a part-time job in Guildford, and would have liked more realistic advice on this, since it turned out not to be the case.

• Induction: Suggestions included more information about what modules would cover; discussions in small groups so that students were more encouraged to
talk and get to know each other; and making induction an opportunity to explore both staff and student expectations.

- **Opportunities to identify and address skills gaps:** Suggestions related both to the importance of an assessment at an early stage to identify skills gaps, and to considerations about teaching – for example, not rushing through course content that many students were unfamiliar with or expecting students to sit tests before they had had a chance to adequately cover material that was new to them.

- **Social support:** Suggestions included better opportunities to meet other mature students (e.g. a mature student common room; a more active mature student society with better email communication; a point of contact for mature students; an introduction to another student of a similar age) and more opportunities to integrate with other students generally (e.g. more places to meet for coffee; more informal meetings with tutor groups; names of course attendees circulated to help students get to know each other).

- **Academic staff awareness and support:** Students wanted greater staff awareness about mature students’ family constraints, for example, a tolerant attitude where a student arrives late for lectures to accommodate the school run, but catches up on the material at another point; a general appreciation that students need to accommodate other constraints and may be pressured for time as a result. Other suggestions for improving the quality of staff support included an early exploration and negotiation of expectations; early discussion of each student’s educational and work background; staff providing an open door policy via email; allocation of a personal tutor for PhD students (as well as an academic supervisor).

- **General information:** Suggestions included communicating to mature students the value of career services and of taking part in voluntary activities that can be helpful in improving a c.v.; and providing a space on the student accommodation website for people advertising to live with other mature students or students wanting to live more quietly.

- **General arrangements:** Suggestions included an expansion in part-time courses and funding; and better consideration for the needs of those working part-time and those living off campus, for example, in timetabling.
Perspectives from key stakeholders

The earlier components of this study suggest several areas where organisational changes, combined with awareness raising amongst staff, could improve the experience of mature students at Surrey. However, to make informed recommendations, it was important to draw on the organisation’s tacit knowledge and learning. In the fourth stage of the research, discussions were held with a number of key stakeholders. These semi-structured interviews were intended to ensure that proposals arising from the project were grounded in a realistic understanding of earlier initiatives, and took account of existing constraints and opportunities.

Policy-focused interviews

Nine policy-focused interviews were carried out, with 13 stakeholders whose position in the University gave them insight into the needs of mature students and the support they currently receive. A generic interview schedule was produced, but in each case this was customized to the role of the individual, and the type of information sought.

The generic questions asked the interviewee whether they had found any specific areas of difficulty that mature students were likely to encounter in pursuing their studies at the University; and what action in their experience had been taken by the University or others to respond to these difficulties. The interview went on to explore the effectiveness of these actions. Interviewees were then shown a brief summary of the themes and issues that had arisen in the template workshops, and were asked whether they had any comments on these, if these were areas where they or their part of the University might be involved in providing a solution and whether they could see any particular way forward in addressing these issues. Interviewees were also asked how they envisaged the new funding regime was likely to impact on mature students. The generic interview schedule can be found in Appendix III.

In this way the project consulted the Student Union; the Student Advice & Information Centre; the Centre for Educational and Academic Development; Registry (as related to Fees and Funding); Registry (as related to Timetabling and Assessment & Awards); the Mature Student Society; Library (as related to learning support); Michael Connolly, a lecturer in Law who has taken a particular interest in the issues facing mature students, and Professor Shirley Price, the Associate Dean for Learning and Teaching within the Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences. Key points arising from the interviews were subsequently checked with interviewees, and amended in the light of any comments.

Findings

From each of the interviews a number of points arose, as set out below.
1. **Student Union**  
Georgie Hancock, Vice-President (Welfare); Stef Jones, Vice-President (Education)

- The kind of problems that come up for mature students involved in academic appeals are often family issues – e.g. problems when a child falls ill just before an exam. The Union was involved in nursing induction week and picked up concerns about late availability of timetables in relation to arrangements for children. Getting timetables early enough is a problem for all students.

- The Student Union wants to communicate to mature students that they can be involved in Union activities – e.g. there are activities that parents can bring children to. On the whole mature students choose not to be involved. The Union is aware that the Union building is seen as a nightclub and sees this as a barrier they would like to overcome. GH is currently writing a guide for students who are parents, in consultation with the University’s nursery.

- Changes are being made to the Student Union website which will mean that students logging on have a personalised homepage, and this should make it easier to market to a target audience – e.g. target mature students with information about activities being run for them.

- The Student Union has been involved in discussions with the Mature Student Society about the need for a venue where mature students could ‘get away from the hustle and bustle’. The Union would be prepared to work with the University to find a suitable space.

- The Union is looking to re-establish a Postgraduate Association which has not been operating in 2010/11 and would benefit postgraduate mature students.

- The Union gives induction talks during Freshers’ Week and can use this opportunity to flag up that there is a Mature Student Society and that some activities take place during the day, making them available to people living off campus.

- Offering consistent use of remote learning opportunities may be more practicable than adjusting the timetable to the needs of the school run. There are some genuine reasons why students cannot come to lectures, and so need
to rely on virtual learning, but at present not all academics use this to its capacity. The University is introducing a new Virtual Learning Environment.

- In relation to the desire for more support from personal tutors, student reps have said that students generally want more contact time, and are interested in small group working, seminars and tutorials.

- It is thought that the fees increase may discourage mature students because they are already under financial pressure in paying for costs associated with children, housing and a car. The whole University environment may change because of people paying substantially higher fees and so having both higher expectations and commitment.

2. The Student Advice & Information Centre

Ram Hosangady, Adviser, Money and Debt; Clare Street, Gateway

- Mature students consult Student Advice about a range of issues, including money, benefits, tax, debt, financial hardship, housing issues, landlord and tenant problems and, occasionally, divorce proceedings. When people visit the service because of financial problems, advice staff must first establish the cause of these problems. To be eligible for help with financial hardship, students must be experiencing unexpected and severe hardship and they must also have taken out the full amount of student loan that they are eligible for. Students are welcome to make second applications during the year. For these applications to succeed there should generally have been a change in circumstances. Having said this, staff are sympathetic and would not just tell people to go away. All other options are also discussed with students. All students who visit are offered staff’s best advice and while not all are eligible for awards, all will be assisted. In the case of mature undergraduates who receive a student loan there is a HEFCE procedure for dispersing funds from Government, whereas for postgraduate and overseas students financial assistance would come from the University of Surrey Fund or an Annual Fund from Alumni support. Student Advice cannot give help with fees, but can help in establishing what sort of charitable bodies might be able to give grants towards fees. Advisers can also offer detailed advice on budgeting, planning for study and tax rebates, and an integral part of this work is an advocacy role, for example in persuading credit card companies to postpone payment of debt. In addition, Student Advice refers mature students
on to other services, for example, the International Office for help with visa problems, the Accommodation Office for help in finding housing on campus or the Centre for Wellbeing for help with psychological issues.

- The difficulties facing mature students most often encountered by Student Advice relate to financial problems. They typically appear more stressed than other undergraduates and more concerned about the future, and what job they will be able to find later. If they have been working and have experienced a sudden drop in income they may be only just managing to make ends meet. They are also juggling responsibilities. For those who have families and live some distance from the campus there are difficulties of balancing home life, commuting and study. It is with this group in mind that Student Advice encourages intending students to seek advice on planning for university early, usually in the summer months. This group’s needs also informed Student Advice in the creation of a laptop loan scheme this year.

- Student Advice argues that the University needs to give more attention to the problem of finances after places are first allocated, asking students at this stage if they have thought about how they will finance their studies. This is particularly applicable in the case of overseas students who may have unrealistic expectations of the current job market. They then arrive to find that jobs are scarce and living expenditure higher than they expected. Language problems can also make it hard to get a job and there can be conflict with the demands of study. Mature postgraduates from overseas particularly struggle to cover costs since they are less likely to have family backing than younger overseas undergraduates. The Student Advice service has in the past helped overseas postgraduate students who were working through the night, as security guards and petrol pump attendants, to support their families. Student Advice considers all university marketing departments (and it is not just Surrey) have in the past been inclined to make combining paid work and study seem very easy. To avoid any charges that universities are “economical with the truth” all prospective students ought to have access to expert advice which includes up to date information about the availability of work in this country, the true cost of accommodation in the community and living costs, including accommodation deposits and fees and utility bills.

- Student Advice finds that each year students complain about the late issue of timetables, and this is a particular problem for those trying to arrange childcare.
In their experience, timetables are commonly issued only one week before teaching starts.

- In 2010 Student Advice attended the Library’s pre-entry day. They normally attend the Fresher’s Fair. They have a stand when student health care professionals in the Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences come in for induction and are completing their criminal records checks. They are also present on ‘Moving in Day’ and at both arrival events for overseas students. Student Advice has offered to extend their pre-registration work with student parents and mature students, and would consider contributing to the Mature Student Society Rendezvous event in induction week if helpful.

3. Centre for Educational and Academic Development (CEAD)

Vicky Simpson, Head of Learning and Technology and CEAD’s Deputy Director; Roger Rees, Senior Learning and Technology Adviser

- For CEAD the issue of mature students is bound up with enhancing learning and teaching processes generally and thinking about “how you make your approach as accessible and engaging as possible”. They encourage staff to think about the needs of the range of learners they may have. For example, mature learners might be working with constraints on their time and flexibility in terms of when and how they study. Technology may be able to help in overcoming barriers, but may also itself pose barriers. CEAD is currently helping colleagues design a programme for students in the workplace who need to work with each other in groups and gain access to materials even though they can’t come into the University.

- In relation to mature students’ concerns about the communication of information: it could be helpful for students to have ‘signposts’ about when they will receive information.

- In relation to mature students’ problems in accommodating the school run when attending lectures at 9 am: while changes would have to be driven by academic staff, CEAD can help in suggesting ways round the problem – for example, with podcasts, recorded lectures or running an online activity instead of a lecture. This relates to the construction of modules and to people’s models of learning and teaching. Some universities are now using lecture capture
systems where a lecture is recorded automatically where desired, and can then be accessed through the Virtual Learning Environment. The University needs to have discussions about these options and consider whether they would be valuable or negative. For the most part when students are told they have 10 or 20 lecturers over 10 weeks it is implied that they are all equally important. But it would be possible to do more to help students understand the shape of their courses. Flexibility depends on this: it is good learning and teaching practice to help people understand the outcome they are trying to achieve.

- In relation to the desire for more personal support: people often want some avenue to talk about ‘me’. Most programmes are being encouraged to look at their approach to tutorials and surgeries and their availability to students. One tutor in the Faculty of Management and Law runs virtual ‘surgery’ hours to address this issue, sitting at home with a handset and laptop. Staff have also used Skype for tutorials.

- CEAD suggests that some of the matters that have arisen through the research could potentially be taken forward by the Student Experience Sub-Committee. This is one of four sub-groups that reports to the University Learning and Teaching Committee. Its remit is very broad. While the induction process is run by individual departments, the Director of Student Care Services takes a coordinating role.

- CEAD is involved in the development of the University's Integrated Strategy for Improving the Retention, Progression and Completion of Specific Cohorts. This is being implemented through the University Learning and Teaching Committee. The strategy focuses on the experience of ‘non-standard’ students. This category of students includes mature students, as well as students with disabilities, overseas students and students from certain postcodes.

4. Registry (Fees and Funding)

Catherine Ashbee, Head of Registry Student Centre and Senior Assistant Registrar

- Registry does not anticipate that the new, higher fees will be a particular disincentive for mature students since they are eligible for the Government funding package, and in the case of students from low income households, University support.
• The situation is more uncertain in the case of MSc programmes. Government funding has been withdrawn from a lot of postgraduate taught areas and there is no Government financial support for postgraduate taught students. It is thought that if universities were to charge at the same level as for undergraduate programmes, this would destroy these courses. The majority of home postgraduate students currently pay £4,000–£5,000. The University’s current position is to increase fees only in line with inflation and only to revise this approach if there are substantive changes in the HEFCE funding model.

• The University has very little undergraduate part-time provision\(^6\) and this is a huge disincentive for mature students. This is something that Surrey might look at but can be very difficult for some types of programme. Many postgraduate courses are offered on a part-time basis and this gives students the ability to stay in employment and support themselves. It is appreciated that if students are studying part-time activities are not necessarily timetabled to fit in with students’ commitments outside university.

• Mature students applying to Surrey may be less aware of the financial support available to them than school leavers, who routinely submit their student finance applications. If these students come to the University’s attention they can provide information. Students coming through Access courses are also easier to reach because these courses can provide support with the application process.

• Registry has explored the possibility of opening the student centre (dealing with admissions, student records, fees and funding, points-based immigration) later in the evening and at weekends. However, advice from the Student Union was that remote access was preferable, and Registry is now moving this way. They try to accommodate part-time students by arranging a registration session at an appropriate time.

• There is a project to review and replace the current Virtual Learning Environment.

\(^6\) The only part-time award-bearing UG courses currently available on campus are in Health and Social Care, and these tend to be NHS funded.
• Allowing exam re-sits when children are ill is a regulatory issue that would need to be addressed by staff in Assessment & Awards. The case could be put that a child being ill should be seen as mitigation.

• For standard undergraduate programmes there is no weekend teaching, but where sessions are timetabled over weekends then heating is provided.

• It would be interesting to think about the scope for electronic networking that would be positive for mature students – e.g. facebook, twitter.

5. Registry (Timetabling and Assessment & Awards)

Miv Fagg, Senior Assistant Registrar, Assessment and Awards; Tessa Day, Assistant Registrar, Timetabling and Module Catalogue

• Registry is responsible for drawing up timetables across the University for central teaching rooms. Most teaching rooms are centrally owned. Faculty timetablers make requests on room bookings and pass these to Registry. Registry is also responsible for exam timetabling. They do not have direct contact with students in relation to timetabling.

• Registry staff are aware that mature students might be especially concerned to have their timetables early because of childcare arrangements or that part-timers might have particular concerns about timetabling, but these issues have never been brought to their attention by staff in timetabling requests.

• Registry sets timetables for everyone on the basis that students are available from 9-6, with the exception of Wednesdays 9-1. Constraints on the exam timetable are that students must not have six hours of exams on a day. Other than this, exams can be scheduled from 9 to 9, Monday to Saturday.

• Registry normally issues course timetables in September, four weeks before the start of the semester, and issues the exam timetable in late April for exams starting in May. Because they are coordinating allocations across the whole University it would be very difficult to bring this forward substantially. TD said it might be possible to do so by perhaps two weeks, though since this would involve deadlines changing across the University it would be a very significant undertaking. For the next two years the dates for the release of timetables have
been set with four week gaps between the release of timetable and the start of the semester.

- What currently happens is that faculties put in requests for specific days or times and Registry attempts to accommodate this. However, they are moving towards integrated timetabling, in order to optimise the use of rooms. Under this system staff will not be able to request particular days. If you are a full-time member of staff you will be available to teach 9-6 Monday to Friday. If you are teaching a course where the theory has to precede the practical it will be possible to take account of this. Currently certain days are not popular – e.g. first thing on Monday and last thing on Friday. Staff will however be able to give certain constraints when requesting a room allocation. The constraints have not yet been specified, but will in due course be explained to staff. Registry staff warn that the more sets of criteria have to be accommodated, the longer it takes to schedule. In principle it should be possible for faculties to request that a course with lots of part-time students be scheduled so that all the sessions take place over two days. Integrated timetabling could however delay the timetable further, since it is anticipated that it will be necessary to allow a few days for academics to check and query the timetable after it has been produced, in case anything is out of place e.g. a constraint has been missed or broken. Registry will still aim to release the timetable to students four weeks before the start of the semester. One benefit of integrated timetabling for students is that it may make it possible to introduce a portal for students to access their individual timetables online, allowing them to check that a session has not been changed to another room or cancelled. At present each department individually draws up its timetables and produces them in different formats.

- In relation to a venue for mature students: Wates House is currently available for postgraduates. The Mature Student Society could book a room via the Student Union if available.

- Students are not allowed to use the student email auto-list because of concerns about spam. None of the student societies can do this and opportunities for staff to access this are also very limited. Registry suggests the use of other channels such as the Stag Newsletter.
6. Mature Student Society

Debbie Crossman, Treasurer

- The Mature Student Society was set up as a result of research into the first year experience at Surrey (Armstrong & Burden, 2010). The founding members listened to what other mature students were saying in the focus groups and realised that starting a society would be one way to improve the mature student experience. While the society is aimed at the mature student age group, it cannot exclude anyone on the grounds of age. In 2009/10 they ran the ‘Rendezvous’, a social drop-in session aimed at mature students and held during Freshers’ Week in the Roots Cafe. This was repeated the following year and about 50 students attended. A number of people said that without this their whole experience of university would have been different. It enabled students who were the only mature ones on their course to meet other mature students at the beginning of the year. In this way, friendships were formed and people were able to access peer support when they might otherwise have been isolated. In 2010/11 the society also held a stand at Freshers’ Fair. This was a mixed success, as it is difficult to ask someone if they are a mature student, but some students joined. Membership was around £2. The Rendezvous and the Freshers’ Fair have been the main avenues for recruiting members and it has been a struggle to ensure that all mature students know about the society. The mature student committee would ideally like to send out an email to mature students at the beginning of the year, to capture those that don’t attend the Rendezvous or read about the society in Surrey’s Big Guide. However, permission to use a general University student email list has been refused and they have also been unsuccessful in emailing a more targeted list of students in older age groups. This has been frustrating as some people have expressed regret that they didn’t know about the society earlier. The committee would also like to raise awareness of the society among individual faculties which could encourage their mature students to attend the Rendezvous. The society currently has about 120 members.

- In addition to the activities above, the society circulates an occasional newsletter, publishes articles in the Stag student newspaper, and has run various events – e.g. coffee mornings and a cheese and wine evening. They also quite often receive queries from mature students who need information about the services offered by the University, or are having difficulties. Sometimes
people have felt that they are being bullied and haven’t had the support they need. The society has additionally given presentations at pre-entry days and has collaborated with SPLASH to run ‘Return to study’ weeks, i.e. a series of skills workshops, targeted at mature students who are returning to education after a period of absence. The society has collaborated with the Student Union to organise IT support for mature students. It has also been involved with departmental research, either by encouraging its members to take part in focus groups or by committee members becoming the students’ representative for a particular project.

• In 2010/11 the society has been quite stretched in terms of the capacity of its committee members. The fact that they were all in their final year, live some distance away and have other responsibilities limits the time they can put into the development of the society despite interest from other mature students: “People wanted to organise future things, but we ran out of steam.” They would welcome additional capacity from the University to help next year’s committee members (not final year students) take the work forward – for example, if the Student Experience staff were to approach faculties about letting their students know about the society and the Rendezvous event. The Student Union has always been very supportive.

• In the first year of their existence the society focused on trying to secure a common room. Their request went as far as the Vice Chancellor but was refused and after a year of trying they decided that they were not going to achieve this. The reasons for refusal appeared to be partly related to lack of space and also to questions over whether it was appropriate to provide different facilities to mature students. The society was offered use of a postgraduate room in Wates House, but was told that it could not be used for eating and drinking. They felt unable to police this themselves and were also aware that this was part of the purpose of having a room: people wanted to save money by bringing their own food. They would ideally like to see a place with a kettle, a microwave, some water, a sink, a small fridge, somewhere to sit, some sofas, a notice board, a plug for laptops, one or two networked table top computers and some lockers for storage. These facilities would make a difference for people coming on to campus from some distance away, who cannot go home between lectures. DC says that most 2nd or 3rd year students living off campus, nevertheless live nearby. Other people living a long way from campus might also want to use a room like this.
• The society has considered holding a regular drop in session as an alternative to a permanent venue, but this would not provide somewhere to return to when you have a gap between lectures. For mature students it is also about getting to know other people and going somewhere where you can find (or can be signposted to) support. Some express a desire to have a safe place to be with like-minded individuals, i.e. to have a break from the younger student population.

• In relation to early provision of timetables: most students would probably be much more satisfied if they were to receive their first timetables a month before the start of the semester, or in the case of the second semester timetable, before Christmas. Part of the problem appears to be the variation from faculty to faculty in the time taken to get the timetable out to students after they have received it from Registry. Psychology is very well organised in this respect. In Law, by contrast, some students haven’t received their full timetable until they start or even later. This may depend on what additions the faculties are making once they receive the timetable, for example, if they are also allocating their own rooms. Exam timetables are currently issued about a month before hand which seems adequate (though mature students who are parents and had exams at half term found this very difficult).

• In relation to the suggestion that students are expected to work 9 to 6 and therefore do not need to know the detailed timetable, DC argues that students will not book childminding and pay for this for the whole period. They have to juggle as best they can and people who have got young children work in the evenings and at times when children can be looked after by the other parent. If you have a 9 am lecture you may have to book your child into a breakfast club that morning. It is hugely difficult balancing family and university life and while you are buying into that, more support means you can cope better.

• One problem that has come up is the scheduling of exams at 6.30pm: DC argues that no one is at their best at this time. It shows a lack of consideration and if it is necessary to do this it should be restricted to first years whose exams don’t count towards their final degree class.
The increase in fees could have a huge impact on mature students’ expectations with regard to both their courses and the standard of facilities. It may also mean that there are more people having to juggle jobs with study.

7. **Library (Student Learning Advice Team/SPLASH)**

Alistair Morey, Learning Development Coordinator

- The Student Learning Advice Team see a lot of mature students who come to them either independently or because they have been referred. These students may have been out of education for considerable time and may experience university as a culture clash, particularly if studying at university as the only way to advance their career. Consequently they often need help with work on academic skills.

- For the last two years Student Learning Advice has run special pre-entry days for mature students in early September in collaboration with the Educational Liaison Centre (ELC). Undergraduates over 23-years-old are invited to this specially targeted session. About 50 people come to the mature student pre-entry day, and it is oversubscribed, although some people don’t turn up. The day is about getting ready for study, and includes sessions on IT, Library, a day in the life of a mature student (from the Mature Student Society) and financial advice. Although broadly the same as two other pre-entry days run for all age groups, it is partly about “getting a lot of mature students in a room together” and giving them the opportunity to meet each other. The finance talk is tailored to the needs of mature students, and covers topics such as council tax and bursaries. By asking Registry to compile a list, SPLASH/ELC were able to send out invitations to the session to all mature entrants over the age of 23.

- In 2011 the learning advice team will also have a presence at the Mature Student Society Rendezvous event, which is part of the University’s induction programme. They will be there as SPLASH, talking about all that SPLASH can offer and studying at university.

- As compared to 18-year-olds, mature students often have more self-awareness, but also, perhaps consequently, more self-doubt. Much of what SPLASH offers (to all students) is about building academic confidence. Some mature students lack IT literacy, for example, and this can be a huge problem where using basic IT
packages is the norm, or for operating in a Virtual Learning Environment. Therefore, SPLASH has started to offer IT study sessions. While not over-subscribed they are seen as a necessary part of the suite of support on offer: “It’s unlikely that anyone else is going to sit down with somebody and show them how to use Microsoft Office.” In 2010 SPLASH ran a week of sessions called ‘Return to study’, aimed at mature students. This was workshop-based and included sessions on IT, study at university and academic writing. This was advertised through the Rendezvous and the Mature Student Society. It was not over-subscribed, but those attending found it useful and there is interest from the Mature Student Society in repeating it.

- SPLASH is also working with MSc/MA postgraduates online on a project called SPLASH Interactive which is on Ning, a social networking site with less advertising than Facebook. This complements workshops for postgraduate students (typically offered in the evenings) and face-to-face support. Postgraduate students are often not on campus much of the time, and in this respect similar to mature undergraduate students. The project offers students an opportunity to work together remotely as well as to interact with SPLASH staff. It encourages interdisciplinary approaches. Getting people to read each other’s work is very helpful academically. They register online and can then access online tutorials and a discussion forum. Participants appear to be very responsive to messages sent out in this way as compared to using normal email channels. It is possible that this kind of online community could be useful for mature students generally.

- In relation to out-of-hours support: the Library is moving towards 24-hour opening times. In the run up to Christmas and in the summer over the exam period they offered six days a week of 24-hour opening with a shorter day on Sunday. The Library is available at weekends with limited staffing. SPLASH does not have the capacity to open at weekends but already offers support on two evenings each week and is planning to increase this to three from August 2011. This is not particularly used by mature students, but remotely accessed support may be more relevant to this group. SPLASH is trying to broaden online support, offering Skype for appointments as the Academic Liaison Librarians already do.

- In relation to skills needs analysis: SPLASH works closely with some departments to provide additional study skills support, for example, putting on workshops tailored to the needs of their students. However, needs analysis is often not done in a very systematic way and students are often reluctant to take courses in
general study skills. As part of the University’s commitment to Personal Development Planning (PDP), some academic departments do sit down with students and carry out a needs analysis. However, tutors don’t always know about SPLASH and what it can do to fill the gaps or to offer new sessions. A couple of years ago the University had a PDP coordinator, who used a tool called Stepping Stones to Higher Education (based on a programme developed at Bournemouth University), which encourages students to reflect on what they want from their courses before they start, and then use this as a basis for discussions with their personal tutors throughout the first year. Other institutions that have tried this approach have found it helpful if used systematically. Staff in the Research Development Programme (RDP), also within Library and Learning Support Services, have built an online training needs analysis for postgraduate researchers, which automatically directs the user to an appropriate course – either an internal RDP workshop or an external one. Scaling this up for use by undergraduates would be a large commitment, but might be a good idea.

8. **Academic staff member (Faculty of Management and Law)**

Michael Connolly, Lecturer in Law

- Having studied Law as a mature student himself (though not at Surrey), MC has taken an interest in the issues facing this group. Having heard that, anecdotally, mature students studying Law often perform poorly or drop out from the course, he has offered to act as a tutor for any mature Law undergraduates. He suggests that other departments could also usefully take this approach, allocating mature students to a tutor who has had the experience of being an older learner.

- MC’s own route into higher education was through an Access course, and he found this did not prepare him for taking Law exams on a university degree course. In his experience mature students often work harder than other students but don’t work ‘smart’. Their effort is too often misdirected, as they spend too high a proportion of their time reading material they don’t have to read. He argues that generally, the advice given by teaching staff to students about the benefits of reading more widely is geared to those that have recently left school and are already used to working more strategically and using question spotting techniques. He encourages mature students to adopt strategic study techniques from the outset.
• In relation to flexibility: there is an argument for a part-time Law degree, and it would attract more mature students.

• In relation to cheap places to eat on campus: MC argues that all students need places where they can meet socially without spending lots of money, but that the University has lost ownership of these venues as services have been contracted out on a commercial basis. While it seems likely that tea-making facilities would be chaos, a common room that has good, realistically priced snacks and food provided by caterers would probably attract both mature and younger students.

• In relation to staff awareness about mature students: MC argues that it is appropriate for personal tutors to find out about what students have done in the past. If it is relevant to the study programme area then this can be very positive and instructive for the course. It is the job of the academic to control the class and ensure that mature students do not dominate. Teaching staff may be more inclined to draw on the experience of mature students on postgraduate courses where learning is more often seen as a two-way process, but for undergraduates there is often an underlying mentality that “we know everything, they know nothing”.

• In relation to the delivery of lectures by other means such as the Virtual Learning Environment: MC argues that lectures are “the core of what counts” and provide the platform to learn. If we move to a situation where people no longer need to be present for lectures then it is not clear what the lecturer’s job is about. There is an understanding that, broadly speaking, in lectures the lecturer talks and students listen, whereas in tutorials the students talk and the tutor comments. This pattern gives the Law degree credibility in the legal world. Someone missing a lecture can be encouraged to borrow the notes from a fellow student. However, if you have a mature student who persistently misses lectures, you have a bigger problem.
9. **Academic staff member (Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences)**

Professor Shirley Price, Associate Dean Learning and Teaching

- Many of the problems experienced by mature students are the same across the student body. For example, younger students also complain about background noise from talking in lectures.

- There are a number of initiatives that are relevant to the discussions about common room facilities. The Duke of Kent building has an area that is used by student nurses for tea and coffee. At one point the University suggested that students use the reception areas in halls of residence as a place to sit. There was also, at one point, a quiet centre opened for use by religious groups, but in practice this was very under-used.

- In relation to the issue of allowing exam re-sits when children are sick: exams are very difficult to re-run immediately because exam papers must be unseen, so it is a question of being allowed to re-take the exam during a later re-sit period. The issue then revolves around the acceptability of reasons given for re-sitting. The University has recently been looking at mitigation. SP considers that if a child is sick and the student is the only carer available then the University should be sympathetic, but the circumstances in which this is allowed must be clear and transparent for all students: it is a question of who falls under the mitigation umbrella.

- In relation to concerns about the late provision of timetables: students in FHMS are generally told that the day runs from 9 till 6 and have to work towards this. SP says all that the University can do in response to these concerns is to try and get the timetables out as soon as possible. There are lots of processes leading up to this, including students choosing their modules. Students currently have opportunities to change their module choice, and this needs to be taken into account in any attempts to issue timetables earlier.

- The Student Union is keen to be inclusive of mature students and can help in promoting the Mature Student Society to new students. Their new website may also make it easier to target students appropriately with information of potential interest;
The Library’s Student Learning Advice Team already works with many mature students to help in addressing skills gaps, and could help in taking forward an agenda for more consistent analysis of skills needs at an early stage. There are examples of good practice in this area in the University;

The Student Advice service is concerned that mature students accepting a place at Surrey should be realistically advised about the cost of living, the time needed for study and the limited availability of part-time work in the current economic climate;

The University is moving towards an integrated timetabling system, in which staff will request sessions within pre-agreed ‘constraints’. For staff to request that sessions are timetabled over a shorter period for courses that are popular with part-time students, this would have to be one of the permissible constraints in the system;

While there are difficulties in issuing timetables substantially earlier than at present, there may be scope for issuing them slightly earlier if this is a priority. While Registry is committed to releasing the timetable four weeks before the start of semester, not all faculties pass timetables on to their students promptly. They could be encouraged to do so, and to provide timelines showing when this information will be available;

The Mature Student Society plays an important role in facilitating social contact between mature students, but would welcome additional capacity from the University to help in reaching mature students and meeting their needs;

A venue for students living some distance off campus remains a priority for mature students, though efforts to achieve this have so far proved unsuccessful.

Taken together the stakeholder interviews suggest that, despite some constraints there are considerable opportunities for improving the support received by mature students and the quality of their university experience. These are explored in the following section.
Summary and recommendations

This study explores the experience of mature students at the University of Surrey in order to understand their perceptions and expectations of the support they currently receive and to identify ways in which that support could be improved or student expectations better managed. The study combined a literature review; workshops with mature students, support staff and academic staff; interviews with mature students; and interviews with a variety of stakeholders across the University.

In past research, the mature student experience has been viewed both as a positive transformative journey towards greater confidence and self-realisation, and as a process characterised by fragility and risk. Studies have found mature students struggling to reconcile competing priorities, to cope with financial constraints, to overcome doubts about their own abilities and to deal with feelings of difference. Despite these challenges, a number of studies indicate that mature students, overall, do as well or better than school leavers in academic terms. Several investigations have proposed ways in which institutions can support mature students in higher education, including changes in the delivery of programmes to help in accommodating family demands; interventions to raise staff awareness and sensitivity; improvements in the quality of information and advice; specialist courses to bridge skills gaps; more targeted induction days; and initiatives to facilitate better peer support.

These themes were to a large extent echoed in the consultative workshops facilitated for this project, which focused on reasonable expectations and current perceptions of University support. Run with mature students, support staff and academic staff they identified a range of key issues.

All of the workshops emphasised the importance of accurate and timely information, which mature students saw in the context of reconciling study with their wider commitments. They wanted more advance notice of timetables and reading lists.

A number of mature student concerns sprang from the difficulties of living some distance off campus, and feeling that the facilities did not adequately meet their needs. They wanted a common room where they could spend time between lectures, and avoid being a captive market for campus shops and cafes. They wanted sympathetic timetabling to reduce their overall number of trips into the University over the week. They felt that the University’s learning environment erred towards being noisy and disruptive in lectures and study areas. They wanted flexibility about where work took place, and consistent use of the Virtual Learning Environment to support them in studying remotely.

Other concerns centred around the quality of student-staff relationships. In common with younger students, mature students wanted to feel that there were understanding
staff they could turn to, and readily accessible avenues for one-to-one academic support. They were also concerned about the need for staff to recognise the different pressures often facing mature students from competing priorities in their wider lives. Beyond this, they wanted staff to be aware of mature students’ backgrounds and commitments, so that learning was approached as a partnership in which the student’s experience and individuality were acknowledged.

Among both support staff and student workshops, there was a strong consensus on the need for an effective process to identify any key gaps in the skills of mature entrants that might hinder them in their studies, and to address these at an early stage with specialist courses. Students particularly gave this precedence and saw it as an area where current provision fell well short of expectations.

Students also gave particularly high precedence to initiatives that would make the mature student experience a more sociable one, emphasising the need for the University to help in facilitating opportunities for mature students to meet and socialise with one another. In this context, they again pointed to the importance of a dedicated common room space or spaces on campus, which would help in facilitating this, together with more effective communication channels to raise awareness of the University’s Mature Student Society. In general, there was an appetite for communications (for example at induction), that were either clearly targeted towards mature students, or acknowledged the different circumstances and needs of this group. There was a particular dislike of being addressed with the assumption that all students were part of a younger cohort, and had recently left home.

A series of interviews with individual mature students provided many illustrations of the way in which the support available to them at Surrey impacts positively and negatively on their experience of university life. While for some, study entailed a difficult but rewarding journey towards an increasing sense of themselves as a successful learner on a new trajectory, for others the academic outcomes were more uncertain. For both groups there could be a sense of struggle generated by level of workload together with difficulties in combining work with commitments in their wider lives. Particular problems arose however, where students found themselves poorly prepared for higher education, because they had taken a less traditional route into study. These were compounded by the lack of a systematic analysis of their skills needs, or by misinformation about the need to cover preparatory material. In contrast, some students emphasised that their experience of the working world had equipped them well to meet the demands of academic study.

Apart from problems related to work pressure, social issues, including a sense of social disengagement, though by no means applicable to all, were the most commonly mentioned source of stress. At worst, participants felt lonely and excluded: “here at Surrey, everything is for the young”. While some living off campus struggled to find
somewhere to relax and study between lectures, there were participants living on
campus who described an acute sense of isolation in their first semester or who
struggled to study in accommodation dominated by loud socialising into the night.
Mature students often sought and valued contact with other mature students, and
there were some suggestions for how the University could facilitate this.

As asked about the support that they had received in their studies, students were
particularly appreciative of high standards of teaching, responsive academic support by
email, and a sympathetic and flexible approach from staff in helping them to reconcile
demands from study with demands in their wider lives. Staff flexibility over study
arrangements, and the occasional extension of deadlines to allow for problems at
home, had both been helpful in enabling students to cope with course requirements.
Frustrations arose where students felt their needs were not understood or recognised,
particularly in relation to the value of their time. Participant accounts highlight the
socially ambiguous territory that mature students negotiate in entering the student-
teacher relationship, and the potential for a mismatch in the expectations of student
support held by students and teaching staff. Their experiences suggest that it can be
helpful for teachers (such as seminar leaders, tutors or supervisors) to overtly negotiate
these expectations at the outset, and also to find out more about mature students’
previous work experiences and educational backgrounds, so that this informs the
dialogue between them. Occasionally, participants reported feeling humiliated or
emotionally diminished in relation to their interactions with staff, pointing to the
importance of staff adopting positive, albeit realistic, attitudes, in their dealings with
mature students.

Interviewees had also drawn on a variety of support services, including Additional
Learning Support, Student Health Care, Student Advice, the Centre for Wellbeing and
Student Learning Advice (SPLASH). Given the wide range of support available at Surrey,
and the fact that problems often arise in adjusting to university life, mature students
need to know from an early stage what help is available from different sources so that
they can be proactive in seeking the right help at the right time.

Both the workshops and the interviews resulted in specific proposals for improvement.
The results from both exercises point to the need for a strategy to address the concerns
of mature students through action at different levels, including staff awareness raising,
improvements in practice and capacity building. In order to take account of
opportunities and constraints, and to better understand different perspectives within
the University, these issues were discussed with a number of key stakeholders, across
the organisation, whose position and experience gave them insight into the experience
of mature students, the support currently available to them and past efforts to make
improvements in this area. These interviews have helped in shaping the following
recommendations.
1. In describing their courses, departments need to be transparent about the skills and competencies required of entrants, and, where appropriate, identify paths available within the University and preparatory reading material for addressing specific skills gaps. In accepting mature students on to their courses, they should draw their attention to these requirements and to the support that is available, if needed, to help entrants in meeting them. Departments should ensure that, at the beginning of their courses, mature students receive a one-to-one assessment with an appropriate member of academic staff, to identify any specific skills gaps that are important for their success in studying, and that will need to be addressed. It is recommended that skills gaps are addressed in the context of individual Personal Development Planning\(^7\), with an ongoing review. Departments will need to work closely with the Library’s Student Learning Advice Team to ensure that appropriate courses are available and accessible to their students at convenient times. In some instances there may be a case for offering tailored pre-entry sessions. All departments should be aware of the Library’s existing provision e.g. pre-entry sessions to support students in getting ready for study and the dedicated pre-entry day run for mature students.

2. A strategy is needed to improve the timeliness with which students receive information, with a particular focus on information that has practical implications for those who have caring responsibilities and need to make arrangements for these. The late issue of course timetables appears to be an ongoing issue for mature students, repeatedly reported in the wider research literature, and also considered to be a problem at Surrey. Some students had not received their timetables at the start of the semester, and there was variation between faculties in the speed with which, once timetables were issued by Registry, they were passed on to students. While for some courses it may be reasonable to assume that students will arrange childcare in order to be available throughout the working week, there are many courses where students will be seeking to fit their study time around family commitments such as the school pick up, and times when partners or relatives are available to shoulder some of the care. The University has now made a commitment through the Learning and Teaching Committee that all students will receive their timetables four weeks before the start of the semester. To achieve this will require participation from individual faculties, in liaison with Registry. In moving

---

\(^7\) PDP is defined as ‘a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development’ (Higher Education Academy website, [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk))
towards integrated timetabling, meeting this commitment should be a priority. A timeline should be agreed and issued to prospective entrants, showing when students can expect to receive course and exam timetables and other key pieces of information.

3. There is a need to consider the content of student induction from the perspective of mature students, in order to provide a more inviting and well targeted orientation package. This means ensuring that there are sessions on offer that are specifically geared to their needs, for example, the current mature student ‘Rendezvous’ session, which offers a social drop-in, could be supplemented by appropriately tailored talks, such as advice about finances, the role of the Mature Student Society or provision for students who are parents. There is also a need to ensure that where talks are aimed at all students, speakers acknowledge the diversity of the student body in terms of age, so that mature students do not feel overlooked or odd, but included and welcomed. Induction also offers an important opportunity to promote the availability of study skills sessions and the existence of the Mature Student Society. The University’s online induction package should include the option of a separate pathway for mature students, again appropriately targeted. Different areas of the website that relate to mature students should have links between them. The Surrey guide for mature students should be updated (once the response to these recommendations has been agreed) and the updated version should include an overview of student advice/care services, explaining what each of these can offer. The guide should be made available in a web based format, with links, as appropriate, to other areas of the website.

4. This project has shown that mature students particularly value social contact with other mature students, and would like the University to facilitate this. The Mature Student Society, set up as a result of an earlier consultation project, has provided a social lifeline for some mature students, but could be much more effectively promoted. One difficulty the society has faced is that, in common with other student societies and because of concerns about indiscriminate emailing, it does not have access to the all student email auto-list. This project found a number of alternative communication channels that could be used. For instance, the Library with the help of Registry was able to contact all students of 23 or over to offer its mature student pre-entry session and there is also a student e-newsletter which carries announcements. In addition, it was suggested that, during induction events, mature students could be invited to
add their names to an email list, whether or not they had decided to join the society, in order that they can be kept in the loop about mature student activities on an ongoing basis. Faculties could be asked to include an invitation to the Rendezvous session for existing mature students as part of the re-induction package offered to returning students. However, the difficulties in pursuing these options, together with a fuller programme of activities, relate to lack of capacity. For this reason it is proposed that, as an important amenity for mature students, the society should be given assistance and resources from within the University to build a more active programme and to promote itself more systematically (see point 11, below). In this, consideration should be given to the range of events provided, so that they cater better for mature students in different age groups.

5. There is a need for greater awareness of the mature student perspective among staff, including the different routes into higher education that may be taken by students and the constraints they face in meeting commitments in their wider lives. Teaching staff acting as tutors, seminar leaders or supervisors should be encouraged to find out about each mature student’s working background and commitment, so that they understand more about the experience that they bring to the course, and can draw on this where relevant. It can be valuable for academic staff to explore and negotiate expectations of academic support at the outset. For mature students with caring responsibilities particularly, a flexible approach from staff can be important in making it possible to reconcile study with family commitments. Staff should be particularly aware that mature students are often under time pressure and need to be supported in taking a correspondingly time efficient approach to their studies. As teachers, staff should be encouraged to adopt a partnership ethos in which students are seen as part of a community of learners. Departments should consider allocating mature students to tutors who have greater ‘mature student awareness’, for example, having studied as mature students themselves. These issues are explored more fully in a good practice briefing in Appendix I of this report.

6. Through this project, the Student Advice service has suggested that mature students would benefit from being encouraged to consider in detail how they will finance their studies when they are first offered a place. To assist them in this they should be offered a consultation (by phone or face to face) with a University financial adviser. (Financial advice is already available during induction and at the mature student pre-entry day run by SPLASH.) Student
Advice was also concerned that, in the current economic climate particularly, the University’s promotional materials should be realistic about the prospects of students finding part-time work in the Guildford area to help them in financing their studies.

7. Because most mature students live off campus, and because they are typically juggling competing priorities in their lives, they are likely to be especially reliant on their ability to use their time well and to fit their studies with other demands. For this reason it is particularly important for mature learners that academic staff are encouraged to make consistent use of the Virtual Learning Environment. Where courses are offered on a part-time basis then departments should consider structuring the course timetable in order to reduce the number of days that students need to be on campus. In moving to integrated timetabling, configuring the course to meet the needs of its part-time students should be a permissible constraint. It is a question for the University whether it wishes to give greater consideration to the value and potential for offering many more of its courses, including undergraduate programmes, on a part-time basis, but this would be likely to make courses more attractive to mature students.

8. Mature students living on campus would value the opportunity to opt in to quieter living arrangements with those who share this preference, and this option should be available in applying for accommodation.

9. The consultation revealed a concern about whether a student whose child is sick at the time of an examination would be allowed to re-sit the exam at a later date. Guidance in this area has recently been reviewed, and it is understood that the revised guidance will implicitly recognise that significant adverse family circumstances may be a valid reason for extending a deadline or deferring assessment. It is recommended, however, that future guidance be made clear and explicit in listing the sickness of a family member, where the student is one of the main carers and is the only carer available to provide care at that time, as an example of conditions that can provide a valid extenuating circumstance for deadline extension or assessment deferral.

10. Mature students, particularly those commuting to the University from a distance, feel the need for a comfortable common room space where they can spend time between lectures, relax or study, plug in a laptop or use a...
networked table top computer, have tea or coffee and eat a packed lunch. This would provide a place to meet other mature students from different departments – especially important for those whose departments have lower numbers of older learners. It would also address the complaint that students living off campus are obliged to become a captive market for campus cafeterias. The University should facilitate the Mature Student Society and the Student Union in identifying a suitable area that can be made available for this purpose, and in equipping it. This could be promoted as a common room primarily for those living outside Guildford, and a meeting place for mature students, though accessible to any student. The most appropriate equipment for hot drinks and food (e.g. kettle, urn, microwave, vending machines, sink, fridge) would depend partly on the scale of use, and would need to be explored with ongoing review.

11. To take this agenda forward, it is recommended that the University appoint a Mature Student Champion from senior management, for example a Deputy Vice Chancellor, who can take a lead in raising awareness about the participation of mature students at Surrey and the need to improve their university experience. It is also recommended that this role be complemented by the allocation of time to a member of staff with operational responsibility for carrying through the improvements suggested above, including awareness raising among staff, an expansion in the programme of the Mature Student Society and a more systematic promotion of the society and its activities. This staff member would provide a focus for enquiries from staff or students related to mature students and their concerns. It is suggested that the Student Experience Sub-Committee, which reports to the University Learning and Teaching Committee, would be ideally placed to oversee the implementation of these changes.

This project has highlighted a number of initiatives at other universities that were specifically aimed at mature students and could, in future, usefully be considered at Surrey, for example, a mature student mentor scheme, a dedicated summer school and the inclusion of a mature student Q&A on the University website. It would also be worth exploring the potential for building on existing work at Surrey to develop an online tool for analysing skills needs for undergraduate students and directing them to an appropriate training course; and for promoting the Mature Student Society to mature students through personalised home pages on the Student Union website.

It is believed that implementing the recommendations above will help in improving the mature student experience, with potential benefits for retention, while also making the University of Surrey a more attractive and inclusive community for all its students.
References


Hansard. (November 24/11/2010). Written answer to parliamentary question.


Office for Fair Access. (March 2011). *How to produce an access agreement for 2012/13*. 

84


Appendix I: Good practice briefing
Appendix II: Draw a lifeline interview guide
Appendix III: Generic questions for key stakeholders
Working with mature students
A good practice briefing for University staff

Making mature students feel welcome is important in making Surrey an inclusive university that celebrates diversity. Early disengagement at school and differing opportunities are common obstacles to higher education for people with poorer social backgrounds or disabilities\(^1\), so offering a second chance to study is a way of widening participation. Mature students also include parents and carers returning to education to improve their prospects after time out of the workplace. This briefing is intended to help staff in meeting the support needs of mature students effectively, and making Surrey an attractive place for them to study. Suggestions here have been drawn up in consultation with mature students and staff.

Good practice:

- In addressing student groups, avoid implying everyone in the room is at the same stage of life: e.g. “You’ll all be getting used to managing your money and doing your own washing”. Find ways to acknowledge that some students have more life experience: e.g. “Some of you may be returning to study after time in the workplace”.
- Check that web and print communications about student life don’t tacitly assume that everyone is a recent school leaver, and that visuals don’t exclude any representation of older students.
- Make sure induction programmes include sessions likely to be of interest to mature students.

Recognise age diversity

Participation by mature students is often underestimated. At Surrey, more than one in four undergraduates\(^2\) is a mature student – meaning that they were 21 years or over at the time of entry. The majority of Surrey’s mature students are in the 25 plus age group. It is easy for the presence of older learners to be overlooked, and this can make these students feel that they are invisible and excluded – that at university, “everything is for the young”.

---


\(^2\) 28% in 2010/11.
In the beginning I felt stupid. In the lectures they kept saying ‘You should know this formula from your A-Levels’ and that blocked my mind and I focused on the points that I didn’t know...”
Understand students’ competing commitments

Many mature students are stretched by the need to reconcile academic work with competing priorities, such as family commitments and paid work. For this reason they may need to be especially time-efficient in their studies and find ways to fit their coursework around other demands.

Good practice:

- Make sure that lecture notes are available through the Virtual Learning Environment, so that students can easily catch up if they occasionally have to miss all or part of a lecture.
- Be aware that where students are carers and are dealing with unforeseen family problems, such as the care of a sick child or older relative, they may need flexibility to cope with study demands, for example, a deadline extension or deferred assessment.
- Be considerate and respectful of students’ time and convenience, as you would expect them to be of yours, for example, notifying them as soon as possible of cancelled lectures and other changes.
- In timetabling courses that are available to part-time students, consider whether it would work well to schedule sessions over a shorter period, so that those living away from campus can minimise the number of trips in and days spent on site.

Explore expectations of academic support

Students returning to study may be unsure what to expect from academic support provided by tutors, seminar leaders or course directors. Both staff and mature students may also have less intuitive sense of how the teacher-student relationship is expected to operate for older learners. A more traditional and didactic approach can feel especially inappropriate for mature students, who may have lots of experience in other spheres.

Good practice:

- Explore and negotiate mutual expectations of academic support at an early stage, including how students can access academic advice between formal teaching sessions.
- Offer academic support by email. Aim to respond within two working days (or five days if you are working part-time) and if you’re unable to do so, send an acknowledgement saying when you will reply properly.
- Ensure that students know how they can arrange a one-to-one consultation with their tutor.
- Approach teaching sessions with a partnership ethos, in which both students and staff are seen as belonging to a community of learners.

“The tutor was amazing. I mean she just made me send her a draft and she’d respond really, really quickly with really constructive comments”
Be aware of sensitivities about age
For many people age is a sensitive matter. Students in their 20s may feel that ‘mature student’ is an inappropriate label that they don’t identify with. Students in older age groups may feel uncomfortable about disclosing their age to other students. Staff need to be sensitive about these issues, whilst still acknowledging the participation of mature students.

Good practice:
• Avoid obliging students to disclose their age in group discussions or classroom exercises.
• Don’t assume that students see themselves as a ‘mature student’. Avoid applying the term to someone in conversation, unless you’re confident that the student is happy to identify themselves in this way.

Create opportunities for meeting others
Mature students can often find their experience of university is not very sociable, and may even leave them feeling isolated and excluded. It doesn’t have to be like this, and finding good peer support, particularly from other mature students, can make a big difference. Staff can help by creating opportunities for social interaction and making sure that students are aware of mature student events and social networks.

“I never socialise with the younger ones...At the same time, I don’t have a lot in common with my own age friends, cos they’re all, you know, hard work, mortgages, children...I feel quite stuck in the middle a lot of the time. It’s a very strange place to be”

Good practice:
• People often get to know each other more easily at times when they are split into smaller groups – think about the opportunities for doing this, both in the classroom and at induction events.
• Make sure that your mature students are aware of the Mature Student Society and dedicated events such as the Library’s mature student pre-entry day and the induction ‘Rendezvous’ drop-in session for mature students.
• Encourage course and seminar participants to circulate a list of names and email contacts at the start of the course.

“The more people I know, the more I am a part of the University, the more opportunities and experiences I get”

Be positive!
Mature students have occasionally reported feeling undermined rather than supported in their dealings with staff. For many mature students, returning to study is a means of finding a new direction in life. It takes courage and dedication to risk failure and rise to the challenge of pursuing another path.

Good practice:
• Recognise the commitment and vulnerability entailed in returning to study after a long interval.
• In advising and mentoring mature students take a positive though realistic approach.
• Remember that advice from the University careers service can be useful for students of all ages.

References

This briefing is based on the following research report: Newson, C., McDowall, A. & Saunders, M.N.K. (2011). Understanding the support needs of mature students. Guildford: University of Surrey.

Supported by the University’s Widening Access Fund
University of Surrey, School of Psychology & School of Management, Guildford, Surrey GU2 7XH UK www.surrey.ac.uk

August 2011
Draw a lifeline interview guide

First collect consent form & background information:

- Participant no.
- Name (initials only)
- Course / year / faculty
- Age
- Committee member of mature students’ society?
- Member of mature students’ society?
- Background – educational
- Background – work
- Living on campus / off campus and whether studying necessitated move
- Whether sharing home with anyone, such as children or a partner
- Part-time / full-time

Brief 1

The purpose of this project is to gain an understanding of what the mature student experience at the University of Surrey is like, in order to feed this into best practice guidelines for the way that the University supports mature students. Interview findings will be summarised across the participants. We would like to use some anonymised interview data in our report, but we will share the summary with interviewees first, and they can request that details be removed.

Through the interview we want to look at the highs and lows of university life, by drawing a lifeline. So, using this large sheet of paper and the pens, please can you draw a line that represents your university life. Use colours if you want. It could be a straight line, one with peaks and troughs or even a spiral. You decide on the shape. You decide where to start and where to finish – for instance it could be when you first applied or something before or after that. Mark on the key events and happenings in your university life, starting with very early events and moving to the present. Show on the line where you are now, with a large ‘me’. Leave plenty of space because you may find that you want to go back and add in new things as one memory triggers off another.
Brief 2 – following drawing

Now help me understand your line by using different symbols – here they are. [give symbol sheet] Look at each event and ask yourself which symbol or symbols are appropriate at each point. For some none of the symbols might apply.

[wait until symbols are applied]

Are you happy for me to record the next part of the interview?

1. Where does your lifeline begin?
2. Where does it end?
3. If I ask you now to sum up your lifeline in one or two sentences, how would you do this?
4. What are the most important elements of your peak experiences? What have you learned from these?
5. What elements characterise the troughs and low points in your university life? What have you learned from these?
6. Where did you need some help or assistance?
7. What sort of help was forthcoming?
8. What sort of help would have liked to have had?
9. Is there anything on this lifeline that you’d want to change if you could?
10. When you first decided to come to university, do you remember what your expectation was in terms of what you planned to get out of it?
11. And do you feel that it is delivering, or will deliver, on that expectation?
12. Is there anything else that you’d like to bring up that we have not yet had a chance to talk about?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event Description</th>
<th>Icon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A peak experience – a high point, a positive experience</td>
<td>↑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A point when you felt really happy</td>
<td>😊</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A trough experience – a low point, a negative experience</td>
<td>↓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A point when you felt sad, fed up or disappointed</td>
<td>☹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A time when there was an important learning point in what happened</td>
<td>!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A point that was somewhat stressful</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A point that was stressful</td>
<td>SS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A point that was very stressful</td>
<td>SSS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A point when you got help</td>
<td>H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A point when you asked for help</td>
<td>AH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A point when someone helped you (who?)</td>
<td>🧑‍🤝‍🧑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A point when you took a risk</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A point when you made a choice to do something</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A point when you had no choice</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Generic questions for key stakeholders

1. Can you explain to me how your role in the University gives you insight into the needs of mature students?

2. Through your experience, have you found that there are any specific areas of difficulty that mature students are more likely to encounter than other students, in the course of pursuing their studies at the University?

3. In your experience, what action has been taken by the University or by others, to respond to these difficulties? [if more than one, may need to tease out different difficulties, different responses]

4. Do you think this kind of approach has generally proved successful or unsuccessful?

5. Do you think there are steps that could be taken to avoid these difficulties arising or to address them at an early stage?

6. Are there any instances you can think of where there has been a change in practice to improve the way in which the University meets the needs of mature students?

7. Was this change successful or unsuccessful?

8. Do you think that there are lessons that can be learnt from this?

9. Does your department have any specific objectives or targets or policies specifically in relation to mature students?

10. How are you / your department pursuing these objectives?

11. From your experience, how do you envisage that the new fees regime is likely to impact on mature students?
Understanding the support needs of mature students, Newson, McDowall & Saunders

12. Through the workshops we’ve held for the project, mature students and staff have identified key priorities for support. I’m interested to know if these would be areas where you or your department might be involved in providing a solution, and if so, whether you can see any particular way forward in addressing these issues. And beyond that, I’m interested in just getting your thoughts on any of these issues, and who might be relevant in responding to them. [give following list to interviewee]

1. **Accuracy & timeliness of information**
   Ideally, information received within 3 months before starting course, including timetabling and extra opportunities if sessions are missed.
   Clarity of information, specifically in relation to timetabling.
   Website information is up to date and reading lists are issued before the semester starts.

2. **University facilities that meet the needs of mature students**
   Availability of appropriate accommodation, particularly with reference to noise level.
   Availability of facilities to support those not living on campus e.g. tea and coffee making.
   Calm and respectful learning environment – e.g. in lecture theatres.
   Sympathetic timetabling to reduce overall number of trips in for those living off campus; to accommodate school drop off.
   Flexibility about where work takes place with consistent use of u-learn and audio recording to allow remote study.
   Exam re-sits allowed if children are sick.
   Flexibility in delivery of support – e.g. support services available at weekends, heating on for weekend classes, late sessions available.

3. **Social opportunities to meet other mature students / integrate and interact with all students**
   A venue to meet other mature students and some kind of programme to facilitate social contact between mature students, maintained by the University.
Mature Student Society allowed to communicate with others using the general email list.
Opportunities to integrate and interact through group work, social events and small group tutorials.

4. **Sympathetic staff-student relations**
   Help with work from a tutor allocated to you who has ‘mature student awareness’.
   Staff approachable and responsive. Emails acknowledged even if response is not immediate. Supportive and helpful attitude.
   Communication of a partnership ethos.
   Recognition and acknowledgement of students’ professional backgrounds, experience, individuality and commitment e.g. through session at outset.
   Awareness and recognition of domestic commitments/wider life needs
   Support staff welcoming, available, understanding, non-judgemental and inclusive.

5. **A more relevant induction**
   Tailored package for mature students with pages on the intranet and in hard copy to come back to if you’ve missed something.
   Induction to cover key issues of relevance to mature students and appropriate introductory literature, including information on council tax and childcare; access to a money adviser.
   Induction sets out expectations of staff and of what students can expect.
   Recognition of needs of mature student community, e.g. Q and A session.

6. **Initial needs analysis**
   The curriculum clear on skills needed and knowledge base required.
   Needs analysis carried out as one-to-one meeting with an academic tutor, with issues addressed up front and revisited later.
   Opportunities for support to plug the gaps in skills/knowledge, that are generally available and clear.

7. **Emotional support available**
   Some support specifically for mature students.
   Centre for Wellbeing sessions that de-pathologise support.