

Paper outline for submission to SRHE annual conference

June 2012

Context

Framed by the lifelong learning, workforce skills and widening participation agendas and underpinned by the Robbins principle that higher education courses should be available to all those who are qualified and wish to study, mature entry to university has risen from approximately 10 per cent of all graduates and diploma holders in 1980 (Department for Education and Employment, 1992)¹ to nearly a third of the undergraduate student body today (HESA, 2009-10).

There were 428,560 mature undergraduates – defined by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) as students who are aged 21 or over on 30 September of the academic year in which they start a degree course² – studying for first degrees at UK universities in 2009-10 and these students represented 30.2 per cent of all first-degree undergraduates (HESA, 2009-10). Mature students add richness and depth to the UK student body and the expansion of opportunities for students who chose to enter higher education later in life is one of the greatest strengths of the UK higher education system (Coleman and Behradnia, 2011). While mature student non-continuation rates are trending downwards, mature students are consistently twice as likely as young students to withdraw between the first and second year of study (HESA Performance Indicators, 2009-10).

Research undertaken and preliminary results

In 2011 two researchers – one from a national political organisation and the other from a university thinktank – collaborated on the first major piece of national research into the experience of mature students undertaking their first undergraduate degree. The research was undertaken in the context of changes to the higher education funding system and an 11.4 per cent drop in mature applications via UCAS for full-time university places for 2012-13 (UCAS, 2012) and in light of existing challenges around mature student retention and attainment. Findings – derived from analysis of datasets relating to mature student characteristics and experiences, a survey of motivations, aspirations and experiences amongst current mature students which received 3,963 valid responses, and a series of workshops undertaken with mature students and university staff – were published in the [Never Too Late To Learn](#) report in May 2012.

Amongst survey respondents 33.6 per cent and 21.5 per cent had considered suspending their studies or leaving their course respectively (McVitty and Morris, 2012) but we found that these mature students did not fit a standard demographic profile. Instead, the experiences of mature students who report having considered leaving their course early were consistently less positive across a broad range of factors. These mature students were more likely to report lower levels of involvement in university life, fewer interactions with other students and staff and reduced satisfaction with the information they received during the application process compared to students who have not considered suspending their studies or leaving their course, as shown in Figures 21 and 22 copied below.

¹ Department for Education and Employment (1992) Statistical Bulletin, London, HMSO.

² HESA (2011) Performance Indicators: Definitions.

Figure 21: How involved in university/college life do you feel? (All respondents N=3,717; Early leavers N=786)

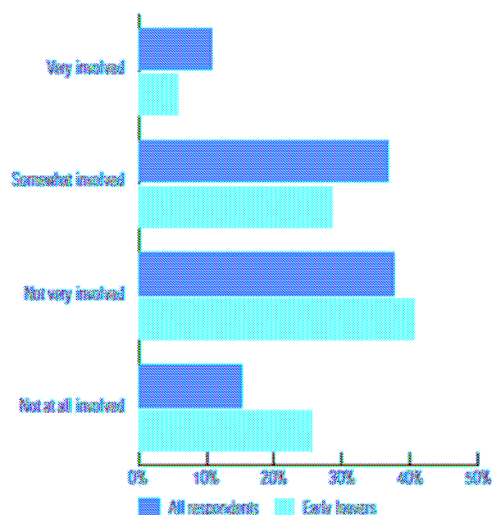
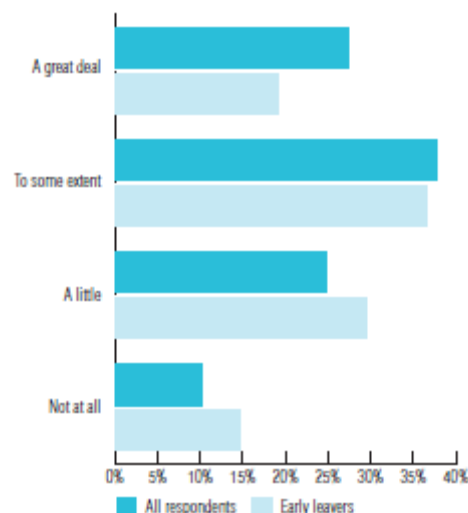


Figure 22: To what extent, if at all, do you feel that you have been able to develop friendships and positive relationships with other students and staff at your institution? (All respondents N=3,721; Early leavers N=790)



This finding, which points to a link between the social capital of individual mature students and the likelihood of them successfully completing an undergraduate degree, warrants further exploration.

Work still to be undertaken

Theories of social capital in education (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 1995) have been applied to student retention and success for example by Liz Thomas (2002). The novelty of our approach lies in situating a significant dataset of a specific national cohort of students (in this case mature students) within social capital theory. We will employ binary logistic regression analysis to probe the nature, strength and direction of the links between the student experience and retention among our survey cohort of mature students. Our preliminary finding of a link between potential mature early leavers and the student experience, rather than demographics, is exciting in that it holds out the possibility of effecting changes.

Through closer analysis of the data and assessment of the validity of existing theoretical-sociological explanations of patterns of retention in the mature student context it may be possible to propose specific interventions that could achieve a demonstrable effect on mature student retention.

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