

Mature Student Recruitment to Foundation Year Provision

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Mature learners are highlighted as being intrinsically motivated to attend Higher Education (HE) and therefore adopt a meaningful learning approach. Consequently, mature learners are considered an important demographic and make significant contributions to the culture of HE. After the Educational Reform of 1997, the widening participation agenda increased numbers of mature learners in HE (Murphy and Roopchand, 2003). However UCAS (2017) analysis indicates that mature learner applications to HE via UCAS are in decline and the current study aimed to examine factors that have contributed to this. For this investigation, researchers adopted a pragmatic approach to research where the application of findings were at the forefront of the research. Using a focus group method, researchers explored mature learner experiences of the recruitment process. In total, five participants took part in a focus group; all were HE students studying Foundation Year Psychology at the University of Bolton. Thematic analysis highlighted several drivers of hesitancy mature learners experience proceeding their applications to foundation year provision. It is proposed that such drivers have the potential to inhibit motivations to apply. The current paper proposes recommendations for practice, focusing on recruitment of mature learners to foundation year provision.

Introduction

In the United Kingdom, HE is traditionally associated with social groups that are considered powerful in terms of status and resources (Burnell, 2015). However, due to educational reform in 1997, the widening participation agenda set to transform the educational landscape by extending HE opportunities to a broader span of social groups. For example, in 1997 the New Labour government proposed a 50% participation rate in HE which would enable greater participation of non-traditional students attending HE (Burnell, 2015, p. 94). As a consequence of the agenda to widen social groups in HE, the HE landscape has seen an increase in non-traditional students attending HE, i.e., non-white students, students with disabilities, from state schools and colleges, and from low participation neighbourhoods (Archer, Hutchings and Ross, 2005).

The aim of this research is to examine non-traditional learner experiences of applying to foundation year provision. Non-traditional students can be distinguished by age, ethnicity,

class, disability, or residence (J. Taylor and House, 2010). This research is specifically interested in exploring mature learner experiences of the HE application process. Kenner and Weinerman (2011) explain that mature adult learners can be considered non-traditional students due to encompassing non-traditional characteristics such as: financial independence, full-time employment, dependants, and often part-time enrolment. UCAS (2017) has identified a drop in mature learner applications to HE. The current research seeks to examine potential barriers to mature learner recruitment to HE in order to encourage a more inclusive recruitment approach in foundation year provision.

Mature learners are an important demographic within the classroom. They make significant contributions to the culture of HE by demonstrating: enhanced transferable employability skills within the cohort, intrinsically motivated approaches to learning, active learning styles, reflective practice in the learning process, complex cognitive skills by integrating new knowledge with existing understanding, and the use of new knowledge to make sense of past experiences (G. Taylor, Walton, Mellor and McCarter, 2007). In addition, mature learners attend HE to take control over their futures, which in turn encourages commitment to their studies (Burton, Lloyd and Griffiths, 2011; Murphy and Roopchand, 2003). Due to the mature learner approach, it is fundamental to continue to recruit mature learners to HE provision.

Although mature learners demonstrate a rigorous approach to learning, the traditional entry requirements — i.e., applicant qualifications — can restrict opportunities for mature learners to attend HE. However, when students have underperformed in assessment, or require entry from employment to re-transition into education, foundation year provision works to actively prepare students for further study in HE. Fundamentally, the foundation year is designed to 'bridge the gap' in knowledge and/or skills, and ensure students are prepared to embark on undergraduate provision (Warren, 2002). Foundation year provision has already and significantly contributed to the widening participation agenda by providing opportunities for 'non-traditional' learners such as mature students. It offers a supportive route to undergraduate provision for mature learners (G. Taylor et al., 2007). Malan, Ndlovu, and Engelbrecht (2014) posit that non-traditional students, such as mature learners, should engage with the foundation year model as the foundation year promotes responsibility for learning under conditions that facilitate independence using problem based learning strategies.

However, HE provision in the UK is experiencing a decline in applications amongst mature learners (UCAS, 2017). Although HE provision has seen a general decline in UK and EU applications, the demand for HE provision amongst 18 year olds remains high despite a reduction in the 18-year-old population. Applications amongst ages 16-18 saw a 1.5% increase between 2016 and 2017 at the end of the recruitment cycle. Juxtaposed to this, applications to HE amongst mature adult learners have declined. Mature adult learner (19+ years) applications to HE saw a 1.9% decrease between 2016 and 2017 at the end of the recruitment cycle (UCAS, 2017). It is likely that this change in the HE landscape could further impact mature learner recruitment to foundation provision. As previously highlighted, many of the non-traditional learners who fit the widening participation agenda for foundation provision consist of mature adult learners (Kenner and Weinerman, 2011). Therefore, the current study aims to explore recruitment opportunities that are specifically aimed at recruiting mature adult learners to foundation year provision.

The Current Study

The current study adopted a pragmatic approach to research where the aim of research was to explore and implement recruitment initiatives to foundation year provision on the basis of mature learner needs. Specifically, encouraging experiences for mature learners embarking on

their education journey would be identified and implemented by the university. In order to identify mature learner needs the researchers adopted a focus group method where participants, studying Foundation Year Psychology at the University of Bolton, could share their experiences of recruitment within a supportive and encouraging setting. The researchers are motivated by the student voice in constructing policies and procedures that directly affect the lives of mature applicants. Therefore, data has been analysed at the latent level to ensure a reduction of researcher bias via interpretation of the results. In addition to this, in order to ensure the focus group questions were also free from potential bias, the researchers developed a question schedule without consultation of previous literature. Thematic analysis was conducted on the data, where information of repeat instance that reflected the aims of the study was coded as important. The issues raised in this paper will be of interest to educational practitioners responsible for recruitment of mature learners to foundation year courses.

The Sample

This research used a focus group method which consisted of five participants currently studying Foundation Year Psychology at the University of Bolton as part of an integrated four year degree programme. Although it is acknowledged this is small scale research, it should also be highlighted that this research is an exploratory piece where patterns established in the data will be examined with more scope across larger foundation year groups within the university. In order to provide context to the findings from this study, participant demographics will be discussed in this section. Participant information has been established from applicant records and extracted from the focus group data. In line with the University of Bolton's Ethical Standards, participants have been provided with pseudonyms to anonymise their identities.

Participant 1: William

William is male and 24 years old. William's former experience in education was six years prior to enrolling onto the foundation year. William explained that because he was not challenged on his previous course he became dissatisfied and returned to employment. William describes himself as self-sufficient with responsibilities that are traditional for the mature learner. William's choice of university was dependent on how well the university integrated with his responsibilities. William was recruited to Foundation Year Psychology via a pre-screening test (interview and essay writing) as he did not attain relevant qualifications to attend undergraduate or foundation year provision. William was accepted onto the foundation year course due to his professionalism and commitment in employment, vocational qualifications, and competency in essay writing. William describes education as:

empowering...it is a choice, rather than a path that you just stumble into...people go through the motions...paying bills...they don't produce anything different [education is] sort of waking them up...igniting an interest in them...it can be changed...it can be different.

Participant 2: Sandra

Sandra is female and 51. After completing secondary school Sandra progressed to further education (FE) studying Art. However, after completing FE, Sandra opted to "have a year out [but], here I am, many years later". Throughout her employment, Sandra has progressed through managerial roles which Sandra explains would have continued if she remained in her current job. However, Sandra explains that at times she has experienced stagnation in employment and held a desire to work directly with child services. Now that Sandra's children have "grown up" she explains: "I can now concentrate on doing something for myself...rather than tell my children to follow their dreams, show them". Sandra was referred to the University

of Bolton via a sibling who is also studying at the University of Bolton, however on a different course type. In addition to being referred to the University of Bolton via a sibling, Sandra also considered level of study as important in her choice of university. For example, her decision to study at the University of Bolton was heavily influenced by foundation year provision, simply because it would allow her to refresh her academic skills before progressing to undergraduate provision.

Participant 3: Hayley

Hayley is female and 30 years old. Hayley spent 10 years working as a Healthcare Practitioner supporting vulnerable adults before making her application to the foundation year. Previously, Hayley studied an Access course in an FE college. However, Hayley dropped out of this course because she felt the FE climate did not suit her mature learner needs. Hayley also took a rigorous approach to her choice of university, attending several open days to “get a feel” for the institutions. Hayley was also recommended to study at the University of Bolton by a member of her parish who had previously studied on the Foundation Year at the University of Bolton. Hayley explains that it was the personal approach that assisted her choice of university and the way in which her needs were acknowledged and supported from the onset. Hayley had considered distance learning as the flexible approach offered by distance learning would suit her home-life commitments; however, it was the supportive atmosphere that encouraged Hayley to study Foundation Year Psychology at the University of Bolton.

Participant 4: Michelle

Michelle is female and 26 years old. Michelle chose to study Psychology after the birth of her first child. Michelle has obtained several vocational qualifications during her employment as a Care Assistant and Senior Support Worker. However, after approximately ten years Michelle was determined to pursue a career in Psychology. Michelle considered applying to study an Access course or studying as a distance learner in order to fit around her home-life responsibilities. However, due to the welcoming approach Michelle experienced from staff at the University of Bolton she opted to study the Foundation Year. Michelle has vocational qualifications that would permit her entry directly to undergraduate provision; however, she felt the Foundation Year would more appropriately prepare her for undergraduate study.

Participant 5: Lindsey

Lindsey is female and 29 years old. Lindsey’s previous experience in education was approximately ten years prior to studying the Foundation Year. Lindsey previously studied an Access module as a distance learner in order to fit studies around her employment. Lindsey’s approach to selecting a university was also rigorous: she attended several open days and required a supportive environment that would actively assist her in balancing both education and employment. The University of Bolton was also recommended to Lindsey by a third year student studying at the University of Bolton. Lindsey opted to study Foundation Year Psychology to prepare her for studying at undergraduate level.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study were collected via a focus group method. Focus groups (group interviews) can be defined as “a group discussion in which participants focus collectively on a specific issue” (Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook and Irvine, 2009, p. 665), encompass between four and 12 individuals, and are led by one or more researcher/s (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). Two researchers met with a group of five students currently studying the Foundation Year. Participants

were asked a series of questions relating to experiences of applying to HE (see Figure 1 for the question schedule). Questions were designed to encourage discussion that was related to the central concept (Marshall and Rossman, 1995), i.e., recruitment to the Foundation Year.

On completion of the focus group, data was transcribed and analysed using a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2017) six phases of thematic analysis. Themes were defined as patterned responses and prevalence to both the research purpose and entire data set. Repeated instances of information were considered important and categorised as themes in addition to information that reflected the aims of the research. Themes were identified at the semantic rather than latent level, in order to ensure the student voices were heard rather than a symbolic interpretation of meaning, i.e., semantic themes examine information at surface level, not beyond what the participants have said in the focus groups (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Q1	Are you returning to education?
Q2	What led to you returning to education?
Q3	Why did you choose The University of Bolton?
	Q3a What/who influenced your decision?
	Q3b What information attracted you to Bolton?
Q4	Why Bolton as opposed to other HE provision in Greater Manchester? (Why Foundation – why not Access or other level 3 options?)
Q5	What would have made your choice of university easier as a mature student?
Q6	What factors do you think would encourage more mature learners to access higher education?
Q7	What do you think the University of Bolton could do to attract mature students (specifically Foundation Year)?
Q8	Was the course marketed in a way that meets your needs?
Q9	Why HE as opposed to FE provision?

Figure 1. Focus Group Schedule.

Analysis and Discussion

From the outset, the aims of this research have been highlighted as: exploring mature learner experiences of applying to foundation year provision to design mature learner appropriate recruitment strategies. The results from this research aim to encourage a more inclusive recruitment strategy, specially aimed at recruiting mature learners to foundation year provision. The following information addresses three themes that emerged from the focus group. Initially, this section of the paper highlights the mature learner motivations to attend foundation provision and highlights issues that restrict engagement with the application process. Based on the information provided in the focus group, the researchers have made recommendations for practice, particularly recruitment incentives for mature applicants to foundation year provision.

Theme 1: Feelings of Stagnation (Desire for Challenge) and Pride

Upon analysing the data, it was clear that the sample were motivated to attend the Foundation Year due to two fundamental reasons: stagnation in the workplace and pride. Initially mature learners were encouraged to attend HE due to feelings of stagnation in the workplace:

I just sort of identified that you know I can either be that man who always provides for his family at the expense of himself... 'cause everyday I'd be at home and it just started to creep in, this sense of dissatisfaction. Erm, and I just wanted to squash that as soon as possible really.

In addition, the sample discussed that they had reached their full potential in the workplace by achieving management and senior positions. The sample felt a new challenge, particularly a new challenge in education, would reignite passion and a sense of personal motivation: "right I'm doing this job, I'm good at this job but I can do better... So it just kind of got to the point where I thought right ok, you need to fix up now". Participants explained that the option to study at foundation year level supported their decision to transition from employment to education rather than applying to undergraduate level from the outset:

I chose Foundation because it'll be, kind of, weaning me into studying again. So although technically I had the criteria to go straight onto the degree, I wanted something to bring me into degree level slowly. I didn't want such a 'shock to the system', if you like.

Therefore, these findings highlight that mature applicants perceive foundation year provision, as opposed to undergraduate provision, as a springboard from employment to education.

Following this, the sample indicated pride as a motivation to apply for the Foundation Year. For example, participants explained that being an inspiration and role model to their children motivated them to attend the Foundation Year course:

I'd worked in care since I was 16, and I'd done my apprenticeships and I got all the qualifications and I worked myself up to managerial level and then I had W [daughter], and then I dreaded the thought of going back because I just thought, that isn't what I want to do. I was only doing it because that's what I knew what to do... I sat down and thought, I wanna make my little girl proud of me.

I'm trying to be a role model to my children.

rather than tell my children to follow their dreams, show them.

In addition, the sample explained that self-pride motivated them to attend HE: "I want to try and push the boundaries and do something that I might be proud of, and that was what kick-started it". The sample explained that studying the Foundation Year not only allowed them to prepare for undergraduate level study, but allowed them to study within a HE setting.

Theme 1 identifies that mature adults are motivated to attend HE due to feelings of stagnation and dissatisfaction in the workplace and perceive foundation year provision, as opposed to undergraduate study, as a bridge from employment to education. From this finding it is suggested that recruitment initiatives to foundation year provision work in collaboration with employers. Creating links with employers offers career development for mature candidates by providing the opportunity to expand employability skills whilst maintaining employment. In addition, institutes of HE should consider the concept of pride, marketing resources to demonstrate the way in which HE is a driver of pride amongst mature adult learners where foundation year provision enables candidates to study in a HE setting. This kind of marketing

and recruitment activity demonstrates to mature learners that the institution is mindful of mature learner values.

Theme 2: Expectations Restrict Applications to HE

Although Theme 1 identified that mature learners have significant motivations to attend university, mature learners experience issues that restrict them from making the initial application to foundation year provision. Specifically, the sample explain that they attribute 'traditional' values to HE and this encourages distorted expectations of the Foundation Year structure and student identity. For example, participants explained that their expectations of full-time indicate 'Monday to Friday / nine-to-five': "When you see 'full-time' you think it's Monday to Friday". This expectation of the Foundation Year timetable conflicts with mature learners needs. For example, participants indicated that home-life responsibilities would have restricted their opportunity to study full-time if this had meant Monday to Friday: "you see 'full-time student' and you think Jesus, Monday, Tuesday Wednesday, Friday. When on earth am I gonna be able to work, see my children, do the shopping. Do the cleaning?". Another participant explained "I didn't have too much of an understanding of university, I thought full-time is full-time. So, you know there's no room to work, or go to work and earn".

Participants also explained their expectation of the lecturer/student relationship were inaccurate before embarking on the Foundation Year. For example, one participant explained that he believed the lecturers would be inaccessible outside of lectures: "it's hard to imagine that it's ok to send an e-mail and make an appointment outside of the days". In addition, participants explained that they were surprised that the lecturers responsible for foundation year provision were interested in their personal circumstances: "we had a lovely conversation and she was just so, like, totally engaging, and so genuinely interested in what I had to say... So, from the get-go, I thought this is really positive, you know? Not what I expected". In order to resolve this issue, marketing information should explicitly highlight contemporary university values, i.e., being flexible, supportive, and student centred, to encourage mature learners to consider applying to foundation provision with realistic expectations of the HE environment and relationships with foundation year staff.

In addition, the sample discussed stereotyped ideas they had held about student identity. For example, participants explained that age inhibited their confidence to attend the Foundation Year simply because they felt they would not fit in with the cohort as their peers would all be much younger:

I thought I'd be the oldest person [William: Yeah] [Hayley: Yeah I did] [Michelle: Yeah, so did I] [Sandra: Me too] it's like I can't do it, I'm gonna be so old.

I can't just go in university with these people that have just left college, and they've been in education all their lives and they can do this and they can do that. And I'm like, I don't know anything, 'cause it's been so long.

When distorted expectations of the foundation year were addressed, the sample explained that HE is an enjoyable environment for them. For example, once attending the Foundation Year course, the sample identified that their peers were of mixed ages and this raised their confidence. In addition, the sample explained that the mature and 'younger' students studying on the Foundation Year integrated well and created a cohesive dynamic within the peer group:

the mature students and you know, the younger students, there's not much of a divide either [Lindsey: No, yeah, definitely] [Sandra: Nicely integrated] and you don't see that throughout the,

throughout the university either [William: No, no, yeah you're right]...you know, so, which is nice...[Sandra: I think we did really well].

Based on this finding it can be observed that expectations of student identity, particularly age, restricts mature adult confidence in attending HE. Therefore, this research encourages marketing to demonstrate the demographic diversity within foundation year provision in order to build confidence amongst mature applicants to foundation year provision.

Theme 3: Acknowledgment of Difference

In addition to highlighting restrictions to making an application to HE, the sample explained positive experiences as a mature learner that would encourage other mature learners to attend the Foundation Year. Initially, the sample indicated that being identified as a mature student with non-traditional characteristics was a positive aspect of their experiences of the Foundation Year. Specifically, by acknowledging differences, mature learners felt that their life experiences were valued: "at least you'll know the tutors'll know your name, they'll [lecturers], know you, your needs are gonna be met". The sample explained that life experience was an important and positive characteristic of mature learners: "I've got the life experience. And you tend to go through life and you have challenges, but because you've got the life experience it motivates you to keep on going". "I have all the mistakes that precede me". More specifically, the sample indicated that instead of having the label 'mature learners' they would prefer the title: "Life experienced learners" as this would appropriately reflect mature learner characteristics. Due to this finding, it is recommended that recruitment initiatives for foundation year provision consider a more appropriate use of language that meets the values of mature adult applicants.

In addition, the sample explained that they have complex responsibilities when compared to other students, responsibilities that often require support and understanding from Foundation Year staff. The sample disclosed that when Foundation Year staff acknowledged their 'mature learner differences', a greater level of support was provided:

you do have jobs and stuff. That's definitely something that you have to, erm, kind of look at something that's going to work around that.

When you reach a certain age and you're self-sufficient, so you have to pay your own bills, you have to support yourself and other people, erm, you know they're the basic needs that need, erm, guaranteeing before you can start looking to aspirational goals. So the foundation system allows all of that in one. So, that's what appealed really for me.

It was very empathetic of the tutors, and obviously the course leaders to be very aware of everybody's individual situations, and there are mature students who have these er, these responsibilities, if you like.

It is essential that recruitment initiatives recognise mature learner differences and adapt recruitment activities to mature learner needs. Mature learners should recognise from the outset that their differences are valued. Therefore, open evenings within informal settings where children are welcome may inspire more of a mature learner focus in recruitment to foundation year provision, rather than focusing specifically on 16 to 18-year-old applicants via taster days for colleges, sixth forms, and schools.

The sample also disclosed that they enjoyed equal status with members of staff. For example, participants explained that they felt apprehensive about the lecturer-student relationship and that equality between the Foundation Year lecturers and the mature learners was important:

we were equals. And, yeah, I didn't feel like it was Ok I'm gonna sit here and I'm gonna listen, it was I feel I can ask questions, we can talk and you can teach me... that's what made my decision that day.

Due to this finding, it is essential from the outset of recruitment to foundation year provision to ensure communication between mature applicants and foundation year staff symbolises equality and inclusion. Further, creating a more mature learner focused recruitment event, e.g., an open evening where informal conversations take place, will emphasise inclusivity for the mature applicant.

Conclusions and Future Directions

The current study confirmed that although mature learners may aspire to attend HE and specifically foundation year provision, there are factors that deter them from making an application. For example, stagnation in the work place and pride encourages mature learners to attend university and the foundation year enables participation in HE; however, 'traditional' expectations of HE might deter mature learners from making the initial steps to apply. This research recommends that recruitment initiatives highlight the diverse demographic in foundation year provision so that mature applicants gain a non-biased impression of the HE setting and student identity. Additionally, this research identified that mature learners value equal relationships with foundation year staff and being seen as having distinct needs compared to other students. Therefore, recruitment events should consider a mature learner approach, where it is clear from the outset that mature learner needs are valued in foundation year provision and in the HE setting. The researchers intend to use data from this study to design a recruitment intervention for foundation year provision that specifically addresses the mature learner needs identified from within the sample.

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