Professional Development Conference
Beyond the Traditional Student: Supporting Mature & Commuting Students in HE

Tuesday 9th February, 2026, 10:00 - 15:15
Online

10:00- 10:15 - Arrive, welcome and introductions

10:15- 11:00 - Commuter Students Matter: Quick Wins and Strategic Change for a Growing Student Population - Rebecca Turner - University of Plymouth

Higher Education continues to be shaped by assumptions that the student relocates, lives near campus and participates fully in residential university life. Yet for a growing proportion of students, this model bears little resemblance to reality.
Drawing on research with commuter students, this presentation will explore how institutional policies, practices and cultures can unintentionally marginalise those who travel to university on a daily basis to access their studies.

Through students own accounts, commuter students emerge as resourceful, resilient and determined to succeed. However, institutional practices relating to attendance, financial support, travel, social engagement and learning spaces can often be experienced as exclusionary. Moving beyond identifying challenges, we will consider what institutions can do differently, outlining a series of evidence-informed quick wins and longer-term strategic responses that can enhance belonging, engagement and success for commuter students.

By centring commuter students voices, we can argue that supporting commuters is not a niche concern but a widening participation imperative. In doing so, it highlights how changes designed to better support commuter students have the potential to create more inclusive and equitable learning environments for a much wider range of learners.

11:00- 11:15 - Break

11:15- 12:00 - From Research to Relationship: Building Student-Led Communities with Mature and Commuter Students - Lucy King - Nottingham Trent University

This session will explore NTU's use of demographic analysis and research in order to develop a genuinely student-led approach to building a mature student community.

Through discussion and reflection, attendees will consider:
- the challenges mature students face
- how meaningful student voice can be cultivated to improve the mature student experience
- why building a mature student community requires patience, consistency and authenticity.

Drawing on experience of developing student communities, ambassador programmes and online networks, the session will demonstrate how student feedback has directly informed improvements for mature students. It will also explore how listening to mature students led to initiatives that benefited other groups, including commuter students, highlighting the wider impact of a genuinely student-led approach.

12:00- 12:40 - From Insight to Action: An Expert Q&A

Following on from the morning sessions, it’s time to further your knowledge and experience by getting your questions answered directly by the experts themselves. Join Rebecca Turner, Lucy King & a current mature student for an open Q&A where you can delve deeper into the challenges and opportunities facing commuter students and mature learners, and gain practical advice to support these groups in your own work.

On the booking form you will be asked to pre-submit any questions you already have around these topics and we will also be taking questions on the day.

12:40- 13:30 - LUNCH

13:30- 14:15 - Unlocking Access: Navigating Admissions Challenges for Mature Students- Rachel Reeds- Think Bold Ltd

Drawing on over a decade of experience in higher education admissions, this session explores the unique challenges mature students face when navigating routes into university — from understanding application processes to feeling confident in spaces often designed with younger learners in mind. We'll unpack the hidden barriers mature applicants encounter, such as caring responsibilities, unfamiliarity with UK education systems, and digital exclusion, and consider how language, communication methods, and institutional assumptions can either support or alienate them. This session will offer practical insights into how HE professionals can make outreach, recruitment, and admissions interactions more accessible, empathetic, and empowering for mature learners.

14:15- 14:30 - BREAK

14:30- 15:00 - Best practice Breakout Rooms

This is your opportunity to connect with colleagues and discuss the topics that matter most to you. Explore how different institutions support these student groups, share experiences, and gain insight into the challenges others have faced and the strategies they have used to overcome them. **You will be asked to select your discussion room when booking.**

Breakout room 1: Let's discuss commuter students
Breakout room 2: Let's discuss mature students
Breakout room 3: Let's talk about working with Access to HE students

15:00- 15:15 Key takeaways & next steps

15:15 - Close

*All sessions subject to change