



University of  
South Wales  
Prifysgol  
De Cymru

# Championing mature learners: what works and why

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# Shwmae!

- I have spent far too long at university
- I've worked with adults in many contexts, including:
- *The Royal Air Force Air Cadets*
- *Relationships and Sexuality Education work*
- *University outreach*



# Today's session

01. Understanding the mature learner experience
02. Relationships and belonging
03. Flexibility and design
04. Challenging our own practice
05. Practical takeaways

A person wearing a red protective suit and a cap is working in a laboratory or industrial setting. They are holding a bright light source, possibly a flashlight or a small fire, which illuminates the scene. The background is dark and industrial, with various pipes and equipment visible. The overall tone is dramatic and focused on the individual's work.

# Understanding the mature learner experience

# When we picture a prospective student, who do we picture?



**Are our outreach models designed equally well for both? Are we starting from the same place?**

Left image: <https://www.sixth-form.com/> (accessed Aug 2026)

Right image: <https://kappanonline.org/teacher-scolded-for-holding-her-baby-while-teaching-online-fagell-career-confidential/> (accessed Aug 2026)

# Who are mature learners?

21+

According to UCAS, the Officer for Students (OfS) and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

25+

According to Student Finance England

# Who are mature learners?

More likely to...

Be from  
underrepresented or  
disadvantaged  
groups

Be from Black, Asian,  
or minority ethnic  
backgrounds

Have known  
disabilities

Drop out of their  
course compared to  
younger students

Have poorer degree  
outcomes on  
full-time /  
apprenticeship  
courses

**Face different  
barriers to accessing  
and succeeding in  
their studies**

(Office for Students, 2020)

# Equality of Opportunity Risk Register

Mature students are identified by the OfS as being potentially affected by **11 of the 12 sector-wide equality-of-opportunity risks**:

[1] Knowledge and skills

[2] Information and guidance

[3] Perception of higher education

[4] Application success rates

[5] Limited choice of course type / delivery mode

[6] Insufficient academic support

[7] Insufficient personal support

[8] Mental health

[10] Cost pressures

[11] Capacity issues

[12] Progression from higher education

# How do we interpret this?



When we identify that a group is less likely to engage, apply, succeed or progress, where do we locate the problem?



Do we locate it within the learner, or do we ask what barriers might be operating around them?

# Exploring barriers without the deficit

- **Confidence:** Can I actually do this?
- **Finance:** Can I afford this?
- **Caring responsibilities:** How will this fit around my life?
- **Previous educational experiences:** Is university for

someone 'like me'?

**These aren't deficits for the learner, but barriers within their environment**

# Where and when might these barriers show up?

**Considering:** Could I actually do this?, previous negative educational experience, family expectations

**Exploring:** Finding reliable information, understanding finance, comparing study options

**Engaging:** Finding time to attend, feeling comfortable in an unfamiliar environment, seeing people like themselves represented

**Applying:** UCAS confidence, personal statement questions, balancing applications with work and family

**Transitioning:** Seeing themselves as a 'student', feeling at home on campus, building relationships with other (potentially younger) students in their cohort

**One-off  
sessions aren't  
enough**



# What works: relationships and belonging

# Outreach isn't simply about giving information

**It can help someone answer: "can I see myself here?"**

- Consistency of contact
- Building trust over time
- Familiar faces
- Informal conversations
- Creating psychologically safe spaces
- Avoiding the transactional touch

# Case study: Access to HE group

- **Context:** 4 x groups across 3 college sites
- **Ages:** 21 to 60+
- A mixture of having / not having Level 2 qualifications
- Unsure of what they could achieve / lack of confidence
- Slight wariness of higher education environment
- Didn't 'fit the image'

# Case study: Access to HE group

- **Consistency:** Regular visits to the college
- **Building trust over time**
- **Familiar faces:** Same two contacts from USW
- **Informal conversations:** Talking at the same level
- **Safe spaces:** Tears, laughter and swearing welcome!
- **Avoiding the transactional touch:** This isn't just a sales pitch
- **Journeying:** Mock interviews, follow-up emails

# Instead of...

One-off contact

Information-heavy sessions

Formal presentations

Generic messaging

# Try...

Repeated contact

Conversation before information

Informal engagement

Tailored messaging

Consistent staff relationships

# Flexibility and design

**What assumptions  
might we build into our  
outreach activity?**

# we might assume learners have...

- Free evenings
- Reliable transport
- Childcare
- Confidence navigating institutions
- Familiarity with HE terminology
- Flexibility at work
- Previous knowledge
- Someone encouraging them to participate

# What does flexibility actually mean?

## **Time**

Different days / times  
Shorter sessions  
Repeat opportunities  
Asynchronous info.

## **Format**

Online / in-person  
Drop-ins rather than set times  
Smaller group options  
'Bring a friend'

## **Content**

Plain language  
Really answering questions  
Honest information  
Less assumption of prior know.

## **Environment**

Welcoming campus spaces  
Clear expectations  
Mature learner representation  
Understand the audience

# University open evening

- Wednesday, 5 – 8pm
- Campus-based
- Academic presentations
- Campus tour
- Student finance talk
- "Bring your parents / guardians"

**What assumptions does this activity make about its audience?**

# University open evening

- Wednesday, 5 – 8pm – *Assuming this time works*
- Campus-based – *They can get to campus, can get childcare, can leave work*
- Academic presentations – *This type of talk will be suitable*
- Campus tour – *They understand what this involves*
- Student finance talk – *They do / do not want the same information as younger learners*
- "Bring your parents / guardians" – *This language isn't necessarily appropriate*

# University open evening

- ~~Wednesday, 5 – 8pm~~ Could we offer more flexibility?
- ~~Campus based~~ Could we offer different ways to engage?
- ~~Academic presentations~~ Could we make HE easier to navigate?
- Are we answering the questions mature learners actually have?
- Can people see themselves here?
- Is this first interaction safe and welcoming?
- What happens after this outreach activity?

**Without creating a completely new programme, what could we change?**

**Don't just make a mature  
learner version of your  
outreach.**

**Look at whether the original  
activity needed to be designed  
differently in the first place.**

# Challenging our own practice

**What might we be doing\* that  
reinforces barriers towards...**

**confidence / finance /  
education / responsibilities?**

**\*unintentionally!**

# Language is a big one:

- "Hard to reach"
- "Low confidence"
- "Non-traditional student"
- "Needs additional support"

## How can we flip the deficit?

"Hard to reach"

□ **Are we reaching them in the right places?**

"Low confidence"

□ **What would help them feel confident?**

"Non-traditional student"

□ **Traditional according to whom?**

"Needs additional support"

□ **How can we design our experiences more inclusively?**

# Now it's your turn!

"Mature learners lack confidence"

"Mature learners are difficult to engage"

"Mature learners have too many competing responsibilities"

**How could we rewrite these statements so that the focus shifts from what the learner lacks to what we can influence?**

**We aren't denying that barriers exist.**

**We are being careful not to turn barriers into characteristics of the people experiencing them.**

# Practical takeaways

**Mature learner outreach isn't about fixing the learner.**

**It's about asking...**

**Who are we designing for?**

**What assumptions are we making?**

**What barriers are we creating or reinforcing?**

**Who could we work with differently?**

**What could we change?**

**The barriers are real. But so is  
our ability to remove some of  
them.**

**Diolch am wrando!**  
**Thanks for listening!**