

Transition into Undergraduate and Postgraduate study for Mature Students - full time and part time

Arguably, students transitioning to University who are mature, be they part-time or full time at either undergraduate or post-graduate entry level will have specific needs, requirements and expectations that differ from the more conventional school (or college) leaver. Their pre-university experiences of both their prior learning, and potentially the workplace, will determine the kinds of issues that need to be recognised in ensuring as smooth a transition as possible to University; including successful retention. The individual circumstances of mature students are less homogenous than their 18 year old campus-based counterparts.

Such students may, for example, have been out of the formal education system for a prolonged period, possibly reintroduced through an Access course; have significant work experience; are currently in employment; commute from their home (often considerable distances) to attend University; and may have other responsibilities, such as child care. Some of these factors preclude full engagement with University life as anticipated and experienced by a school leaver. Therefore, a particular understanding of this category of student is paramount in supporting their transition and induction to ensure a successful and enjoyable academic experience.

Student View

“I didn’t know what to expect. I needed pointing in the right direction to prepare.”

“The access course prepared me well but I would have liked to have known what to read in advance of starting the course.”

“I have a family and I commute to University. Even though I use my commuting time to read I’ve found it hard to adjust to the amount of material you have to read.”

“It feels as though the younger students are more prepared and have a greater understanding of what to expect.”

Students in the focus group reported that in general there is a balance to be struck in managing one’s time when living at home and coming to University. For example, the challenging amount of reading, juggling family commitments and time and energy taken in commuting to and from the University campus. They also reported that more support could be provided to help them appreciate in advance the challenge that lay

ahead and understand the expectations of academic life beyond specific information about a particular course.

Examples of good practice experienced pre-arrival included: information directing students to Skills@Library and the VLE; Facebook groups set up for peer support in answering course-related queries and (peer) support systems / mentors.

Students in the focus group reported that the workload has much more breadth and depth compared to, for example, an Access course which comprises three days per week and that expectation is to be a more independent learner; taking more personal responsibility along with the anticipation to work more autonomously - the “focus on you” to do the work and/or research; going ‘above and beyond’ what is required as a minimum. Examples of good practice experienced on arrival included: follow up one to one meetings with tutors post-induction; guidance on what to focus on pre- and post-lectures with time allocations ascribed to a particular piece of work; being able to look at lecture notes prior to each lecture; running a peer group support system – for example when students from levels two and three support those in level one.

Many of the above issues raised are common to students entering University at any age but comments raised specifically from a mature student perspective included:

- Much of the pre-and post-arrival information is aimed at young school leavers
- There is a need to consider mature students for example, who are parents and/or who commute. For example, evening events are prohibitive especially for those with childcare responsibilities, such as, ‘Give it a Go’ events are mostly in the evenings. Add on travel time if commuting and it is a long day so the suggestion is to have more daytime activities
- To mature students, school leavers are perceived to be better prepared for university for example in contributing in seminars
- For some mature students it was a “shock” in terms of work at level one as a high standard of work/expectations at a research-intensive university
- Opportunities to encourage to meet other mature students either on the same course or from the same faculty through for example, small (support) group discussions as university can be a solitary experience for mature students particularly those not living on campus

- There is a need for a faculty/school member of staff who understands the needs of mature students – currently not necessarily evident with every Personal Tutor

In light of student feedback the **following recommendations** are suggested to enhance the support for mature students transitioning to University:

- Provide a post-offer guide about what to expect, such as, guidance on time commitment required for a particular course
- Communicate pre-course essential reading across all programmes
- Be clear about where pre-information such as proof of qualifications certificates need to be submitted when asked to provide in advance of arriving at university
- Inform students how to enrol on discovery modules, if a course enables broadening – to avoid any disadvantage if enrolment is left until arrival
- Owing to the volume of information provided all at once, suggestion to possibly extend the induction period
- Provide approximate travel times commuting to university specifically if journeying from off-campus University accommodation
- Provide a list of rank ordered priorities suggesting what to focus on first above other activities
- Mature students are in a different position to those coming from full time study, that is, 'A' levels or even an Access course and so personal tutors should be made aware that not all students are the same.
- The Lifelong Learning Centre event a week before induction is recommended – it was found to be very useful although some (mature) International students were not necessarily aware of the event

In summary, the **key recommendations** from this work are to:

1. Provide support for the mature student that addresses the different prior experiences, needs and requirements compared to a school/college leaver; communicated in a way that is appropriate for a mature student.
2. Create opportunities for mature students to meet / connect early on in the transition and induction process within and across programmes which can be maintained during their studies.

Case Study: Lifelong Learning Centre support for mature students

The Lifelong Learning Centre provides a supportive home for mature and part time undergraduates. They offer a specific Welcome Day Event in Freshers' Week with flexible attendance to fit with existing commitments and where friends and families are also welcomed. Refreshments are available throughout the day, including lunch. The day offers the opportunity for mature students to meet each other and to meet staff from the Lifelong Learning Centre and the wider University. They can find out information on registration and enrolment, have a tour of the campus, find out about the support they can expect and about the facilities, services and societies at the University and Leeds University Union.

Students from the Lifelong Learning Centre have worked together with Leeds University Union to produce a guide for new students, recognising that starting University a bit later in life can be a different experience than that of an 18 year old and addressing some of the common issues to make their experience of studying Leeds a happy, rewarding and successful one. The guide includes a section which challenges some of the long-standing myths about who participates in higher education in the UK with the realities of the experience. It includes case studies of mature students, along with advice on sources of support and 'top tips' from current students and alumni on a range of topics including studying, practical issues and finance.

Student Voice: Lifelong Learning Centre

"I had no idea where it would lead. I never thought I'd be considering postgrad studies, I had no idea I had ANY academic ability at all. It's been hugely empowering and has changed how I see the world completely. I am far more critical and questioning and really enjoy understanding and challenging political ideas and taken for granted assumptions about our society. I feel so much more informed – it's great to have an opinion and to be interested in things that before I never understood."

Tina Brocklebank

Resources

University of Leeds Lifelong Learning Centre

<http://www.llc.leeds.ac.uk/>