



MODULE CODE: ECPT7006

ASSESSMENT COMPONENT:
Research Project

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Use of Generative AI in Assessment

RESEARCH	For this assessment, you can use Generative AI to support you in research, including searching for bibliography, using tools to summarise, compare and interrogate materials.	Yes ☒ No ☐
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AI Acknowledgement

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Introduction/justification of study area

Universities in Wales have less mature students applying to university than they have in recent years, the number of mature students applying to attend university is the lowest it has been in the last decade (Universities Wales, 2025). With this in mind, this research project will be looking at the challenges that mature students face in universities and the barriers that they may face in returning to education. First it would be pertinent to define who would be classified as a mature student, for the purpose of this research a mature student will be defined as a student who is over the age of twenty-one at the start of their undergraduate studies or a student who is above the age of twenty-five at the start of their postgraduate studies (Aberystwyth University, 2024).

Burton, Lloyd, and Griffiths (2011) conducted a study looking at the barriers that mature students face in accessing further and higher education, this study looked specifically at students studying childcare and health and social care in Wales. This study found that the biggest barriers that were faced by mature students looking to return to education was personal and family commitments, financial and geographical challenges. This study will be the basis of the literature review, looking at if these are still the biggest challenges that face mature students returning to education or if mature students face other barriers to further and higher education. This research project will also look at if the barriers found are still challenges that face mature students while studying and if this impacts their studies and student experience. The focus of the research will be of women and the barriers they face as the decline in women's application to university is larger than that of male students (Sorella, 2022).

Review of literature

When looking at the experiences of mature students, it is important to remember that these students return to an education setting with previous experiences of being in education settings and often employment and life experiences. These, although sometimes can be an asset, can also form a barrier for mature students and their university experience (Stevenson and Clegg, 2013). Many mature students that return to education have been told in previous education settings that they are not academic enough to go to university and that although previously they may have had a growth mindset, due to other people's opinions, before returning to university they had a fixed mindset (Jones and McConnell, 2023). Many students with negative experience in education apply to attend and succeed in university, but many carry the self-doubt from others' opinions with them and it has the potential to act as a barrier to education (Duckworth, 2014). It has been suggested that mature students return to education with 'complex needs' for example the lack of confidence in their ability to learn (Busher, James and Piela, 2015). Sorella (2022) however, has a different opinion, that mature students come to the classroom with a wealth of experience and knowledge and that they can be an asset to the classroom as there is the potential to bring differences of opinions and experiences to the learning environment. This is supported by Leeds Beckett University (2025) who believe that life experiences can be valuable in a student's academic studies.

For some students, attending university may be the first time that they have attended an education setting since they left school. For these students, Dawson (2014) suggests that they may feel that their mind has gone stale, or that they are too old to learn, even though that is not the case. Christensen and Craft (2021) in a study of mature nursing students found that many of the students returning after a gap in their education were concerned about the technological advances since they were last in an education setting. The reliance on technology in education today, for example with virtual learning environments caused anxiety for the mature students returning to education, also the fear or academic conventions, which they had not needed to worry about before. Homer (2022) found in a study that mature students did not enjoy the experience of online or blended learning as they could not see the other student faces and they did not feel involved in the lesson. Without adequate support then these factors have the potential to be barriers in stopping students from attending university.

Simmons and Podrebarac (2021) state that a high proportion of female mature student's study part time due to their family commitments at home. Although studying part time allows for students to work and balance their family commitments alongside their university studies, it does come with drawbacks. Sharp (2013) states that not all universities offer part time courses, this could mean that for a mature student who wishes to complete a university course part time may not be able to attend their local

university or college and so needing to travel or possibly completing education through distance learning. The popularity of distance and blended learning has increased in recent year, some suggesting that this is due to Covid 19 and the impact the pandemic had on higher and further education, however the popularity of blended and distance learning was becoming more popular prior to the pandemic (Amrane-Cooper, 2023). A barrier faced by mature students who are attending university courses that are online or learning via blended learning is without the human understanding, and that mature students learning styles and that the needs and interests of the learner cannot be met by online or blended learning without human attributes (Keengwe, Schnellert and Kungu, 2014). This is however challenged by the Office for Students (2020) that state that on part time university courses are achieving better outcomes from their studies than younger part time students on the same course.

Christensen and Craft (2021) found in their study that mature students with families at home that rely on them faced many challenges, one being that the mature students would take their stress and frustration from university out on their families at home, causing the students a lot of guilt and the families upset. Jabal (2021) agreed with this statement adding that challenges that a student's faces in university could have an impact on their relationships with friends and family. With the added time needed to complete studying and the possibility of changing in work situations, possibly moving from full time employment to part time employment to fit in work required for university this can change the dynamics at home, where other adults may need to take on roles that they previously did not need to (Jabal, 2021). All these things, Webber and Dismore (2021) believe can leave a mature student, in their case mothers who are mature students in university, to feel guilt for the time they need to spend studying.

A barrier that is faced by all students but is particularly challenging for mature students is that of finance. With the cost of university, the financial implication of leaving work to study or cutting down hours to facilitate university study and the raising cost of living, mature students face financial challenges. UCAS (2019) reported that mature students state financial hardship as one of the main reasons for dropping out of their studies and go on to say that most universities do not recommend working more than fifteen hours a week in a part time job while studying at university. Lewis (2022) writes that students over twenty-five and students from a lower socioeconomic background are the hardest hit by the cost of living crisis, showing that for mature students who may have their own families to support, the rising cost of living could put additional financial strain on the student. The office of National Statistics (2023) Reported that ninety-one percent of students are currently concerned about the cost of living crisis while studying, seventy-eight percent of students stated that their financial challenges may affect how well they do in their studies and thirty-five percent stated that they will not go on to study further after the course they are currently completing due to the financial challenges that they

are facing as a student. With all students facing these financial challenges, it can be understood how this could be a barrier for mature students to return to education.

A barrier that was not considered until this literature review took place was that of a mature student's lack of academic sociality and lack of representation within the academic community (Office for students, 2020 and Mallman and Lee, 2017). Mallman and Lee (2016) reported that mature students are 'denied full membership' as a 'normal' student due to their age. The study also discusses how mature students are stereotyped by their younger peers. This could be contradicted however by the University of Wales Trinity Saint Davids student union, as the president for the Swansea campus is in fact a mature student who is proud to represent the mature students in the university (UWTSD Student Union, 2025). Cardiff University (n.d.) also provide support for mature university students by holding mature student's events which allow for mature students to meet at the start of the academic year, having a mature students association and having a mature student officer. If this support is in place then it could be questioned why mature students can feel isolated and underrepresented in the University. This could show that universities understand that peer support and feeling part of an academic community encourages student retention, engagement, and performance (Mallman and Lee, 2017). This is supported by Blake (2013) who stated that universities in Wales are outperforming the other nations of the United Kingdom in recruiting 'underrepresented' students, for example mature students into starting courses at the university.

Methodology

Before being able to conduct the literature review it was paramount that the area of interest was narrowed down to a singular question. For this study, the overall area of interest was that of the experiences of mature students in university, this was then narrowed down further after looking at recent statistics on the numbers of mature students applying for university courses and seeing that the number of applications is declining year on year. From this the focus of the literature review was to be to look at what the barrier are that mature students face when wanting to return to education with the hope of gaining a better knowledge of why the number of mature students applying for university is declining year on year.

In order to conduct this search, the researcher has used a variety of sources to find information. The primary source was the University of Wales Trinity Saint Davids library resource catalogue, both in person and using their online access catalogue. Other search methods were used, for example google scholar and the internet search engine google to find up to date research and statistics.

The literature review took place by searching peer review journal articles, books focused on education in post compulsory sector, and articles. It was necessary to ensure that the resources found are organised for when research is to be used in the literature review.

The next step was sorting through the research found to filter what would be used in the literature review. This filtering system was based on the subject of the research, the date to ensure that my research is relevant and up to date, this is specifically important when looking at the statistics used. Once the research is filtered for relevance and date, the data was extracted to use for the literature review.

From the research found the next step is analysing the data found and look at the patterns and trends as well as identifying the gaps in information and studies on the chosen subject. From there the report can be formed based on the research and the findings on the given subject, looking at the validity of the literature and the identifying where further research can be done.

Discussion

From the research conducted it is clear that mature students face the same barriers as younger students as well as the additional barriers that they face being mature students. The additional commitments that mature students face often include caring for a family, working to support a family and the financial challenges that the family could face if the mature student gives up work to study. Many mature students in this situation also feel guilty about returning to education and how that is going to impact the family (Stone and O'Shea, 2013).

When looking at the challenges that students face through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), it could be said that mature students would not be able to reach their full potential in their studies due to their needs not being met in the lower levels of the hierarchy (McLeod, 2025). Maslow first tier of the pyramid are the physiological needs of the person, ensuring that the basic needs of the person are met. For a mature student who may be facing challenges from having to reduce hours or leave work in order to attend university then they may be facing financial challenges. For a mature student with a family this may be a concern to them as to how they are going to meet the physiological needs of their family. As the literature review showed, seventy-eight percent of students in the UK fear that they will not reach their full potential due to the consequences of financial difficulty. This could potentially lead to mature students not being able to afford their physiological needs such as housing, food, and clothes. If this happens then the student will not be able to progress on to the next level of Maslow's hierarchy. This challenge can be overcome with the use of grants, student finance and bursaries from the university to help students in need. The University of Wales Trinity Saint David offers a range of bursaries and support to help all students in need, there are however bursaries that are more relevant for mature students, for example the childcare cost bursary which will help with the costs of childcare while a student is attending university (UWTSD, 2025a). UWTSD also offer a range of tools to help students with their budgeting and wellbeing that may be affected by financial difficulties (UWTSD, 2025 b), these services aim to support the students to ensure that any financial challenges do not impact on their studies.

The third tier of the pyramid looks at the need for connection. "Value and promote diversity, equality of opportunity and inclusion" (Welsh Government, 2023) as this professional standard states, all students need to feel valued, respected and included. For a mature student who is feeling isolated and underrepresented, they may not feel connected to their peers and the university in which they are studying. The feeling of belonging within the university community is important for all students to feel supported and connected. It could be argued that this is more important for mature students with the additional challenges that they face in attending university. The literature review identified that mature students may feel isolated by not feeling a part of

the social culture of university and by not being represented as a group of students. It has been reported that universities in Wales are excelling at recruiting mature students however the Office for Students (2020) report that mature students have a lower retention rate than that of younger students. With some universities offering mature students their own representative and organising student meets, where mature students can meet with each other what else can be done to ensure that mature students are not isolated in university. The lecturers and tutors would also need to play a part in supporting their student, professional standard states that staff are to “Build positive and collaborative relationships” (Welsh Government, 2023), by building positive relationships with the students it may help the to not feel so isolated at the university, it may also give the mature student the confidence to attend a group or meet with others who are in similar situations.

The fourth tier talks about confidence, self esteem and having the respect of others. As previously discussed, these are challenges that mature students may face while studying at university. The research show that mature students may lack confidence in their ability to learn or question if they have the skills required to be a student at a time where technology plays such a big part of the learning journey. As is stated in the professional standard “Plan and deliver effective learning, teaching and assessment” (Welsh Government, 2023) it is up to the lecturers to plan and implement effective learning for all of their students, this would also mean that the lessons need to be accessible to all the students to remove the barriers to learning. These barriers could be overcome by accessing services to support the student in adapting to the digital learning environment and supporting them in their studies. All students would also have access to well being support, helping them to overcome barriers in confidence and self-esteem (UWTSD, 2025b). Unfortunately, unless you are told that these services are available to you then you may not know where to turn for help when it I needed. It is for this reason that having a strong university community around you would help to point you in the right direction when needed. This would be covered by the professional standard “Demonstrate commitment to learners, their learning, safety and well-being” (Welsh Government 2023), as it is all lecturers responsibility to ensure that students wellbeing needs are being met, and to help guide the student to the correct support for them.

If looking through the eyes of Maslow, these would all be barriers that mature students would face that could hinder them in achieving their full potential as a student by stopping them from reaching the self-actualisation stage. By not reaching the self-actualisation stage that does not meant that a students will not achieve the qualification that they are working towards, but rather that the barriers that are put in place could present extra challenges to them. These barriers may also be a concern of potential mature students who feel that they could not return to university to gain qualifications.

Conclusion

As can be seen from the literature review and the discussion the barriers to learning that were identified by Burton, Lloyd, and Griffiths (2011) are still barriers to learning for mature students today. The challenges faced since this study in 2011 have only increased with the cost of living crisis putting additional financial strain on students and their families and with the continuous development of technology in education some mature students may be put off from attending university by the fear that they will not be able to keep up with their younger peers.

What was not mentioned in the original study but came to light during the literature review was the isolation that mature students feel. It had not been highlighted that mature students struggle to find their place in the university where the culture is targeted at the younger students. It was also noted that some universities did not have a mature student representative in the student union to highlight the needs of the mature student in the university and very few universities had social events targeted at mature students to help students to build connections and a community for support.

The barriers that have been identified in the research were all barriers that universities put support in place for to support students in reaching their full potential, however, unless you are in the institution then you would not know that the support is available to students which may be a deterrent to applying to university.

The biggest barriers that were identified in this study for mature students returning to education is the students' other commitments, for example a family, and also the financial strain that would be put on them whilst studying. The majority of students apply for student finance; however many are not aware of the additional support that is available to students to help alleviate the pressure of financial struggles while studying.

When looking at the research and findings through Maslow's hierarchy of needs it is clear that mature students would face many challenges before being able to reach their full potential while studying. This however is possible, and the barriers can be overcome with the help and support of their peers and the educational establishment. This raises the question, are student communities essential in students reaching their full potential? This is a gap in the research that was found, as the feeling of belonging and identity was so strongly linked with the educational experience, the question of community and representation for mature students is one that would benefit from research.

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