

**A report into mature students'
experiences of support at the
University of Bristol**

Presented by Hazel Bennun

With acknowledgements to Dr Tony Hoare

Background

As part of the Widening Participation agenda the University of Bristol has identified mature students - those over the age of 21 at time of application - as a demographic within the University that requires specialist support to fully access their educational experience. They are a segment of the University's undergraduates it has not examined closely thus far with research evidence, yet is also one that shows clear certain signs of distinctiveness and, arguably, distress.

Undergraduate applications from mature students nationally have been much slower to recover from the imposition of £9,000 tuition fees than those from younger students, who make up the majority of UCAS applicants each year (either directly from school or after a year's deferring for a gap year or otherwise). In Bristol they form a significantly smaller percentage of our annual undergraduate intake than the national average (in 2012/13 the proportion of mature students in Bristol's intake was reported in the HESA Performance Indicator tables as only 4.7%, against a UK average of 24.1%, making it the fourth smallest university percentage in the country). They are at risk of not forming a sufficient critical mass within many departments - and maybe even in the University as a whole - to be the focus of appropriate tailor-made responses whether in teaching and learning or administrative arrangements. Their proportion of the Bristol undergraduate intake is not only comparatively small nationally, but is also declining (our in-house Widening Participation statistics show that the total intake of mature students fell by almost one third between 2009/10 and 2013/14). This may reinforce the image of the University from without, and possibly from within, as a 'traditional' campus in what it teaches, how it teaches and who it teaches.

Recent research by the University's Widening Participation (WP) Research Cluster has uncovered two other characteristics of mature undergraduates, warranting this specific piece of research. First, while the University has a low withdrawal rate of undergraduates by national standards, mature students are conspicuously more likely to withdraw than their younger peers. Second, our ability to predict which undergraduates do well in their final examinations is far less determined by entry grades on UCAS forms for mature students as compared to their peers. Of course, these exams may have been taken some time ago so much water may have flowed under their personal bridges since then. However, an implication of this is that their experiences as mature undergraduates at Bristol in a pressured educational and social setting where they are very much the

minority may affect their outcomes at least as much as their somewhat dated educational record.

Aims and Objectives

Therefore, the aim of this qualitative research is to gain feedback from mature students and stakeholders from across the University in order to better understand how well the University provides specialist support for mature students, and to ascertain how this support might be improved.

The research was based around broad research questions:

- What support do mature students need to enable them to access all aspects of the University experience?
- How do mature students at the University of Bristol view the support that the University provides?
- How do students feel that this support could be improved?

Respondents and methodology

Four focus groups were conducted; three student focus groups and one stakeholder group. As the mature student demographic is comprised of all students aged 21 and over the three student groups were divided in recognition of differentials within this diverse group:

- Younger mature students, aged 21-25
- Older mature students, aged 26 and over
- Mature students with parenting responsibilities

Each of the three student focus groups consisted of four participants, twelve students in total. Of the twelve students nine were currently undertaking an undergraduate degree, two were postgraduates who had completed their undergraduate degree at the University of Bristol within the past two years, and one was a University of Bristol foundation student who will be undertaking their undergraduate degree at the university this Autumn. One participant was an international student and two respondents disclosed their status as people with disabilities.

Due to low participant take up during recruitment for the focus group and low turn-out on the day, the stakeholder group consisted of three participants: a representative from the finance office, a representative from the accommodation office, and one representative

from academic teaching staff who was also the undergraduate admissions tutor for his school.

To address the research questions the focus group discussions generated qualitative data on the following themes, the results of which will be discussed in the findings section:

- Reasons for attending the focus group
- Perceived differences between the mature student body and the rest of the student demographic
- Students' expectations and experiences of support during:
 - The application processes
 - Prior to commencement of course
 - Induction
 - Their respective courses
 - Wider University services

Stakeholders' viewpoints on provision at the various stages were also discussed.

- Participants' suggestions for improvements

All members of the focus groups were asked to complete a short written document at the end of the focus group to allow time for anonymous personal reflections and summing up of important points. This written data was coded and analysed along with the transcriptions of the focus groups.

All focus groups were carried out by the same researcher, were digitally recorded and transcribed for analysis. All participants were reassured of confidentiality and the anonymity of their contributions - initials used in this report are pseudonyms and cannot be used to identify participants. All participants had the opportunity to view transcriptions and request amendments. One participant from the 26+ group – the foundation student – withdrew her transcript.

Why participants volunteered for the focus group

Participants reported receiving good support from the University, in particular the Mature Students' Advisor, and viewed contributing to the focus group as an opportunity to 'give something back'. Respondents also volunteered as they wished to contribute to improvements in future support offered to mature students at the University.

Three students in the 21-25 focus group thought that they had different perspectives which would be useful to the research (an international student, a student originally from Bristol and a student with disabilities).

Two students had participated in ambassador roles or were involved with widening participation schemes and were generally concerned with widening participation issues.

Participants in the stakeholder group felt that they could contribute understanding of how their departments provide support to mature students and were interested in hearing how mature students view support in order to implement improvements.

Findings and discussion

Main Findings:

- Mature students are a complex demographic. The focus groups revealed shared concerns across the mature student body and also concerns specific to the groupings (such as parents or 21-25 year olds). There is a need for these variations to be recognised through targeting support at groups within, as well as to the whole of, the mature student demographic in order to fully support mature students.
- Participants were generally happy with the support they receive from the University, and praised the Widening Participation office in particular. However, a number of respondents felt that some staff and University processes are not supportive of their needs in terms of acknowledging or empathising with issues that affect mature students.
- Mature student and stakeholder participants identified mature students as a group that may feel or become isolated from the rest of the student body and from the University as a whole, and who require support to integrate.
- Signposting of support was raised as an area for development, including opportunities for mature students to find accommodation together.
- Mature students felt that more consideration for their needs was required with regard to timetabling practices.

These findings are discussed in greater detail below, and participants' suggestions for improvements to mature student support follow at the end of the report.

Section 1 – ‘Getting In Experiences’

1.1 Experiences of support during the application process

Participants who had been in full time education directly before starting university reported that the UCAS process was straightforward and that they were supported by their relevant institutions.

Respondents not on a course which led into a degree, or who were studying through the OU, were not clear about whether or what support was available to them from the University of Bristol or elsewhere during the application process. There was uncertainty about what to include on the application form and what exactly institutions were looking for. One participant reported using internet forums to find advice on application procedures, which she did find useful and had sought out independently.

The difficulty in understanding the application process for students outside of institutions was highlighted by participant MV, who explained how she had considered including her Duke of Edinburgh Gold Award on her application, even though she had completed it over 10 years ago and had had a career and had gained significant life experience since:

MV (parent): “. . . . so yeah I almost put that on there cos it felt like I needed to . . . my application had to look as strong as an 18 year olds with a slightly 18 year old focus cos. they will be marking three thousand of these and you’ve got 10 from somebody who is over thirty. But equally I need to justify myself and explain how I would manage it even though I was old.”

Participants in the 26+group debated whether support from the University should be available to mature students during the application process as some thought this would bias mature student applications, whereas others felt support would level the field for mature students who often apply without help from an institution into a process that they felt was not designed for them:

GA (26+): “. . . basically it was just read the UCAS form and get on with it. There was no help or input beyond that which is on the UCAS site - which is all geared towards the assumption that you are 18 and you are half way through you A Levels. Now my A levels are so old the exam board no longer exists”

*MV (parent): "Another University initially rejected me because I didn't have any A*s at GCSE, until I pointed out that it wasn't possible to get A*s ... those are classic mature student issues."*

Participants in all groups and the academic representative in the stakeholders' group reported feeling that the application process was geared towards 18-year-old students, and that this could disadvantage mature students. Members of the stakeholder group felt that the University of Bristol's image and some of its admissions mechanisms are more geared towards conventionally academic students who have taken a traditional route into higher education. This may create barriers for mature students, who are more likely to have re-sat exams and less likely to have the top A Level grades. There were concerns that this could disadvantage mature students during the application/admissions process if their mature student status was not recognised and taken into account.

Participants felt that the application process was a continual juggling act where they would be assessed by the same criteria as an 18 year old, whilst simultaneously being scrutinised to justify their presence as a mature student.

Participants who had contacted the University of Bristol directly reported positive experiences. In the 21-25 group AS, who was transferring from another university, found that the contact from the WP office supportive in finalising her application to Bristol:

" I had help from someone in the WP department and he was really great, so that was good. I had support from him in talking to the department, finding out what spaces were available so yeah, I think the WP people ... were really great."

Those students who had applied from another bricks and mortar institution, or who contacted the University directly, found the application process much less stressful than other mature students. Signposting of any existing information provided by the University about the application process, inviting mature students to contact individual departments and/or staff members, and the provision of appropriate support to those who are applying without the support of another institution would be beneficial for prospective mature students. The participants of the focus groups - who had been successful in negotiating the application process - experienced stress due to uncertainty of expectation during application and were successful. It seems reasonable to assume that there is an unknown quantity of prospective mature students who may have also successfully negotiated this stressful and uncertain stage had they had access to support mechanisms.

1.2 Support prior to starting at the University of Bristol

Participants were asked about the support and communication they received after application and prior to the commencement of their studies.

This communication was important to how well supported, prepared and confident participants felt about joining the University. The Widening Participation Office was named as a useful resource for advice and signposting.

1.2i Contact from department staff

The quality of communication and support reported by participants was inconsistent across departments.

One member of the 26+ group, MB, was required to fly from Australia to attend interview, she discussed the support she had received from the WP office:

MB: “. I had to fly over for 15 min interview, ... the school weren't very helpful ... I was asking in regards to funding if I would be an overseas student or a home student, and they [WP office] went through the whole questioning that officially you can't do until you are offered the place ... cos otherwise I would have had to spend thousands of pounds to do an interview that then I wouldn't be able to take at all, so I thought that they were really helpful ... I could contact her [Mature Student Advisor] with regard to 'like I'm a mature student coming trying to sort out accommodation where do people live not necessarily in student residential?' and she put me in contact with some other mature students.”

Another member, GA, who was also living abroad, had contacted her department prior to applying to Bristol. She received a reply from the department member she had emailed and felt this contact was supportive and gave her a positive view of the University of Bristol in comparison to other institutions she had approached.

There did not seem to be a University policy on home students who are living abroad as GA was also applying from abroad (France) but was not required by her school to travel to interview.

One member of the parent group reported the positive impact that communication from both her department and the WP office had on her, prior to the commencement of her

course. Participants felt targeted contact was a good way to support mature students prior to arrival at the University.

SH: “. . . . so then my individual school were in contact, the Mature Students Officer was in contact, my school sent a book out for us to read and that was [inaudible] a little present, that was lovely”

R “So you had widening participation in contact with you as well as your course, because you were a mature student?”

SH “Yes”

This type of targeted support for mature students was varied:

EP (parent): “I just received just one sort of - it wasn’t even a letter just one little printed piece of paper that big saying we have received your application we have such and such amounts of applications therefore it’s taking us this amount of time to process yours, thank you. So I mean I, I suppose that’s what everybody receives.”

Another member who had contacted his department directly reported positive communication from the admissions tutor in his school in terms of emotional support, but felt that the information he had received was not entirely accurate, which had effected his predicted workload:

PS (parent): “So I was saying: ‘I would like to come in as a second year which means I’ve obviously not done your first year syllabus, these are the OU courses I’ve done, are they equivalent?’ And he went: ‘yeah, absolutely’, then I turn up and I find out that they are not absolute equivalent so I have not done the majority of their first year, but I have done the things that the students won’t do until next year. So I’ve done some third year work, some of their first year work and some of their second year work . . . so it was really nice, but it wasn’t quite accurate.”

Mature students who are also parents felt under pressure to plan and prepare for university work as far in advance as possible, due to the uncertainties of demands on their time such as children’s illness or household emergencies. Unpredicted workloads increased the stress of university pressures. Participants felt that this pressure was greater for mature parents than for a student without these outside responsibilities and members of the group did not feel that this was always understood or acknowledged by staff. There is a need for understanding of such issues and for staff to ensure clarity and

accuracy of information supplied to mature students if they are to be fully supported to fulfil their potential.

1.2ii Mature student open days

Various departments at the University of Bristol run open days specifically for mature students. The academic representative in the stakeholder group suggested that younger students in the mature bracket (those who had taken a gap-year) might be more suited to the regular open day as their needs and concerns are more similar to conventional students than the concerns of other mature students. He noted that in his department mature students are supported prior to joining the course, but once on the course the specialist mature student support stops. SA reported that mature students are often more likely to take advantage of the support offered to everyone (eg personal tutor) than other students.

1.2iii Accommodation

The accommodation office do not have a specific mature students advisor but do have information specifically for mature students on their internal wiki which all members of the team have access to, so that advice is consistent across the service. There is advice available on their website and there are particular halls of residence that they suggest to mature students. Mature students are not guaranteed accommodation with other mature students although they can request to live with other matures/quiet halls of residence. If a student makes direct contact with the accommodation office they are given personalised advice on an individual basis.

In both the 26+ and the 21-25 focus groups the Mature Students Advisor was named as a source of support when trying to find accommodation that would suit the students' specific needs, as participants had contacted her rather than the accommodation office.

The 21-25 group stressed the importance of living arrangements to their university experience and, although some participants had chosen to live in halls as they wanted to try to integrate with conventional students, there was general agreement that having the option to share accommodation with other matures would be beneficial. LS (21-25) had contacted the WP Office to get help finding suitable accommodation prior to starting his course, who advised him of which halls might suit his needs. There was confusion amongst the group as to whether designated mature student halls existed, and there is a need for more clarity for mature students on this point. Students felt that the option to live with other mature students in halls or other residencies, or a way to connect and make

living arrangements with other mature students prior to the start of their courses, would improve support provided by the University.

1.2iv Finances

The finance office does not run a special event for mature students prior to the commencement of their courses or have a specialist mature students' advisor, but they do visit mature student open days run by different departments to give targeted advice. They also offer individual advice and support should students seek it out, and, as the accommodation and academic representatives both reported, information, advice and guidance is given on an individual rather than 'mature student' basis.

1.3 Experiences of induction

Members of the student focus groups were complimentary about the support that they received during induction, and felt that the mature students' events provided excellent support in terms of preparing students for their courses, building their confidence within the University and providing social opportunities for mature students. Participants felt all aspects of induction targeted at mature students should continue. EK, a mature part-time student, identified Freshers' Fair as useful in as it helped her to understand more about the university, which helped her to feel integrated.

1.3i Study Skills Sessions

Participants in the 21-25 and 26+ groups felt that the study skills session for mature students was of a particularly high standard, and praised both the member of staff who conducted these sessions and the Mature Students Advisor for the supportive and welcoming service they provided. Participants found the presenter's level of clarity and the 'noddy's guide to doing anything' approach extremely beneficial in terms of skills acquisition and as a boost to their confidence:

MB (26+): "It was taking away, maybe the irrational, fears that you had. Cos you know you're obviously capable of doing it, but not necessarily confident ... it just made you feel like you had every right to be here."

AS (21-25): *“Although you feel, like, totally out of touch and you haven’t been in education for a while, but you know, ‘this is it, if you follow this it can be that simple’, I think it made it less overwhelming and she’s just, she trains you so lovely and just, very like ‘can-do’ . . .”*

The addition of a computer refresher course during induction was proposed by the 26+ group, who felt that mature students needed support in this area.

1.3ii Social Support during induction

The social aspect of joining university as mature students was a concern in all groups, and was especially pronounced in the 21-25 group. Participants felt very well supported by the mature students’ sessions and were delighted that they were given time to meet with other mature students before starting their courses:

JS: *“yeah I was really glad.”*

AS: *“I was like ‘oh my god thank goodness’ cos I was really worried – like otherwise, like, how do you find other mature students – off a poster? Like anyone?”*

LS: *“Yeah, I think the induction meeting at the start of the year was very good, because you are sat in the hall with a lot of mature students and you think, ok, I’m not the only one.”*

AS: *“Yeah, it puts it in perspective”*

The parent group also identified social opportunities as an important aspect of support. Although participants in this group were interested in joining societies, and felt they would have had much to offer, they identified the drinking culture as a barrier to their involvement. Members of this group suggested actively targeting mature students for student society recruitment as a way to boost integration. Other student focus groups identified student drinking culture as a barrier to integration during Freshers’ Week and to joining societies, suggesting a need for more targeted social opportunities including societies and wider social activities for mature students. All student focus groups proposed the introduction of a mature students’ society as a means to create social networks, and raise the profile of mature students, which would help students to feel more integrated into university life:

EP (parent): *“When you say mature student society that’s great that works, but if you say a mature student group, mature student event . . . but if you say society then it’s on a par then with the rest of the university and you feel integrated, you feel like ‘hey we’ve got*

our society too' which I think is a great idea -that sort of slight shift in the terminology creates such a difference."

All three groups initiated discussions about a mature students 'parenting' or 'buddy' scheme – some students had had experience of the subject specific parenting schemes, with mixed reactions to being parented by younger students. All groups advocated a system where mature students could volunteer to be part of a scheme that was a support network for mature students.

The mature student drinks at the start of the year were viewed as a positive way to meet other matures, and participants felt it would have helped them feel connected to others in the University and develop their own informal support networks if these had continued. The Students' Union was seen as unwelcoming by mature students, with one participant describing it as 'aggressively young'.

All members of the 21-25 group agreed that mature students socials throughout the year would improve their support. They felt that as mature students are in such a small minority socials, or a mature student society, should be supported by the University. It was also suggested different age groups within the mature student demographic could be targeted as participants felt they had more in common and shared more concerns with mature students within the 21-25 age bracket than older matures.

All of the students in the 21-25 group expressed a desire to be part of a group that could offer support to other mature students in the future. This participant from the 21-25 group talked about why a buddy system that allocated a mature student who had already been through first year would be supportive to new matures:

AS (21-25): "I think that people need to know that it is possible to do, and I think ... with a uni like Bristol ... although it might seem really overwhelming and people might not even apply because, especially the type of uni Bristol is, very traditional, quite homogenous in the type of people that come here, I think that almost letting people know ... that yeah it might suck the first couple of weeks ... and I think as well, having someone to talk to when you've got horrible flat mates or people don't understand, having someone you can go and talk to, even if they can't do anything."

1.3iii Parent group and induction

One participant, SH, talked about her concerns about being unable to fulfil her roles as a parent or student to the standard she felt she should, as her time would be divided

between the two. She found the induction week supportive in terms of dealing with these concerns:

SH: "Somebody in the induction week stood up and said: 'just remember that sometimes as a parent you're not going to be able to put as much work in as somebody who is 18 and hasn't got those responsibilities'. Which is probably stating the blindingly obvious but it really, it kind of made me think, [sigh] OK, it's alright."

Participant MV also felt that the roles of parent and student were conflicting, and that it was impossible to do a complete job of either:

MV Yes I'd stay I'm doing a 70% job as a [...] student and a 70% job as a mum but god dammit that's 140% [laughs]

Participants in the parent group clearly benefitted from the emotional support during induction.

Overall participants found the induction activities provided for mature students very supportive both emotionally and academically. There is a question mark over whether the younger mature students would benefit more from the mature student open days or the regular open days, this merits consideration in order to best support this section of the mature student demographic.

There was a strong desire amongst all student groups for mature student events to continue beyond induction.

Section 2 - 'Getting On Experiences'

2.1 Perceptions of mature students and issues that they face

Student participants identified mature students as having greater life experience and thought that mature students had made more of a conscious and considered decision to come to university than more conventional students. These differences were viewed as positive for mature students. Mature students were viewed by the stakeholders as a more diverse group who had more life experience and were more likely to live independently.

The parent group and the 26+ group highlighted the extra family and financial responsibilities of mature students. Their decision to study meant leaving full time employment which had financial and emotional consequences on mature students and their families. This pressure that was seen as positive (likely to work harder), but also stressful (emotional pressure that other students may not have):

MB: "I don't have any children but it's not just my decision ... it's not just impacted me, my life ... that's somewhat of a different pressure I think that you feel as a mature student - you're not just letting yourself down."

Participants in the 26+ group identified mature students as less familiar and less confident with information technology than conventional students. Readjusting from work to study and the shift in identity required was viewed as a distinctive characteristic and difficulty of becoming a mature student.

Participants reported having less time to commit to participating in extra-curricular activities due to commitments outside of University, which was seen as a disadvantage. Concerns about isolation and integration due to being a different age and at a different stage in life were raised in all groups. The 21-25 group were more concerned with their ability to relate to conventional students than those in the other focus groups.

The stakeholder group identified mature students as prone to feeling intimidated by students who had followed a more traditional route to higher education, a view that was confirmed by the student participants. The 21-25 group discussed how mature students are more likely to come from diverse backgrounds, and were more likely to have suffered problems in their educational past. A non-orthodox route to university was considered to represent a less valid means of achieving their place by this participant:

SJ (21-25): “.. mature students tend to come from more diverse educational backgrounds rather than if you come straight from A levels straight into uni [where] you have ... quite a straightforward educational history and everything’s been sort of ‘as it should be’”

The need to justify their position as mature students in what was viewed as an 18-year-olds’ world was a common theme across the three student focus groups, and was most pronounced in the parent group who reported high levels of personal stress resulting from the tension between their roles of student and parent, as they felt incapable of fulfilling either to the standard they would like to.

The stakeholder group reported that mature students often felt less confident in the university setting. SA, the academic representative, noted that matures’ greater life experience and higher levels of motivation often equipped them with skills and knowledge that more conventional students did not have, but that mature students did not always recognise these as valid within the University setting. Mature students suggested that they learn in a more holistic way, which was positive as it led to deeper learning, but could also disadvantage them when studying for exam type questions which were viewed as more narrow.

2.1i Finances

Although the University defines mature students as those 21 and over, Student Finance England (who fund student loans) define mature students as those aged 25 and over when they start their course, resulting in the Finance Office working with a slightly different ‘mature’ demographic to the rest of the University. This difference in University and Finance policy was reflected in the focus groups - there was no discussion of finances in the 21-25 group when they were asked about wider university services. Those classed as mature students were viewed by the finance representative as more likely to come with issues that complicate their funding situation, such as already possessing a degree, having children, or applying for additional support. BA, the representative from the Finance Office felt that mature students needed specialist support from the finance office to ensure that the advice mature students are given by the government is correct:

BA: “ ... we need to provide a lot more information, advice and guidance to make sure that the advice that they’re given by the government is actually correct there is ... a big difference between an 18 year old student coming here for the first time compared to

somebody who is in the mature bracket ... they come with more things that could go wrong for them that we have to put right."

2.2 Expectations and experiences of support on course

Participants were asked about what they had expected in terms of mature student support, and how well they felt they had been supported so far on their courses. Members of the 26+ group stated that they had not expected any special support in relation to their status as mature students and that there is a fine balance between mature students feeling supported and integrated by supportive staff and processes which are designed with this minority group in mind, and feeling singled out or bracketed off as mature students and being isolated from the rest of the student body. Some mature students felt a sense of pride in being able to cope without too much special treatment.

Members of the 21-25 focus group reported having good relationships with their tutors and felt that being a mature student befitted them in this respect as they had a more professional approach to interacting with university staff. Although they felt well supported by their various schools, they did mention being used as a model student disproportionately during group discussions. Some participants found this frustrating as they felt that other students were not contributing as much as they were to the educational experience of others. Aside from this they felt their lecturers treated mature students and more conventional students as equals. Unlike other focus groups they felt that they had a better understanding than younger students regarding the bureaucracy of the University.

The parent group members were divided in terms of their experiences of support whilst on their course. Two members had had positive experiences; with staff providing what they felt was sensitive support and awareness of the difficulties that mature students and parent-students face. One respondent, EP, reported staff supporting him with personal issues - going out of their way to find out why he had not been attending - and with financial issues, with academic staff contacting the finance company on his behalf. He reported that this support was crucial to him continuing in higher education.

Participants receiving good support were on smaller courses with high numbers of mature students and staff who were parents. These factors were perceived as important

for high quality support. Group members who had had not had good experiences of support were on larger courses, with low numbers of mature students.

Students found it particularly frustrating when department staff lacked understanding of the complexity of their situation, or were unclear with advice:

PS: "... anytime I've looked for help or guidance on being a parent within the [...] department there's been nothing absolutely nothing, when I talk to members of staff a few of the faculty have gone 'yeah that's great I'm a parent too I know exactly what it's like, try this and this', and then I've gone further up and I've basically been told 'well that's a very grey area nothing we can do about it put in an extenuating circumstances form and we might consider it'. Not, 'yes you've definitely got extra responsibilities you're gonna not focus on your exams probably not pass them and probably have to retake them.' But that's not even considered, there's no real kind of consideration I was still told 'this is a very grey area' - there's no definite you can do this or you can do that or flexibility it's just tough, you should have planned your pregnancy better."

MV: "... it's like 'oh well we don't care it's not that big an issue' and it's like, well it kind of is sometimes there is some stuff that they really have no clue about."

The stakeholder group noted that once at the University mature student guidance is not straightforward, as matures are a diverse minority. Members of the stakeholder group were not aware of any University guidance in relation to mature students' specific needs, and the creation of such guidance may improve understanding of mature student issues as well as consistency of support provided across departments.

Mature students often require a more flexible approach to deadlines and exam dates than other students and SA, the academic representative in the stakeholder group, advocated that this be taken into account and perhaps formalised in policy in order to properly support mature students. He felt this was an area the University could improve upon, whether intra-departmentally or as a University-wide policy.

Members of both student and staff focus groups felt that the University's image as a more 'traditional' university, with a homogenous, high-flying student body from a particular section of society was a barrier to mature students who were not only viewed as less likely to apply, but also as not properly recognised as a minority group and therefore treated in an inflexible manner. Low visibility of mature students due to low numbers was seen as a factor compounding these issues.

2.2i Timetabling

Participants felt that the timetabling of lectures was geared towards younger students and did not take into account others, such as mature students. Mature students expressed the need for more awareness of mature student issues when timetabling – for example living further away or having familial responsibilities - and for greater flexibility:

GA: "I expect that there is method of setting all 9 o'clock lectures for first years to get them in the habit ... but it makes it very difficult for a mature student in my department who lives in [...] and has [...] children under 12, and is still managing to do it full time, but she has to leave at something like half past five ...If they timetabled for 10 her life would be so much simpler, but she can see why they don't and I'm not suggesting that you ought to timetable for the odd one or two mature students, but it does have implications."

The issue of timetabling was discussed at length in the parent group in relation to exam timetabling, timetables being released late, and the organisation of contact time. Exams and deadlines timetabled directly after holidays are difficult for parents, as opposed to non-parent students, their home life responsibilities increase during holidays as their children are off school. Participants felt that they were at a particular disadvantage during these times.

Contact hours that were timetabled at the two extreme so of the teaching day (eg 9am-10am or 4pm-5pm) were very frustrating for mature students with parenting responsibilities as they coincide with the school run. Days with timetabled hours at each end of the day or with one or two teaching hour per day were also difficult for those with childcare responsibilities, or those who lived outside of the city. Participants request that these issues are taken into account when timetabling for mature students and parents.

One parent participant had not received a timetable for the week until the Sunday before, which was also half term week. When she spoke to a member of staff about timetabling release times she was told that if she was not prepared to be at University from 9am-5pm then they would question her commitment to the course. She had given up paid employment and was a parent and felt that the member of staff did not acknowledge or understand her situation. The same participant had experienced very late timetable changes and said:

MV: "... they change stuff anyway, even when they give it to us the day before so, so it feels like that's a mind-set that they just expect us to have no other life."

One of the parent participants received her timetable at the beginning of term and the hours stayed the same throughout. She found knowing exactly what she was doing for twelve weeks much more manageable than those participants who timetables changed regularly. One participant who had been at the University for several years discussed how timetabling had recently become centralised, and as a result staff were no longer able to timetable in a flexible manner, dependent on the individual needs.

2.2ii Signposting

Signposting of wider University services was mentioned as an area for development, and participants reported being unsure as to whom they should go as their first port of call when they had an issue.

MB “ don't really know where to go from there, because then if you go to the school then they don't get the student finance issues, and I don't know if ... there was someone ... a contact who would know maybe a bit more about mature student things?”

There were conversations in all groups about recruiting a 'go-to' person for mature students. Although participants reported a good level of personalised support from the Widening Participation office, they were sometimes unsure of whom to contact first for information, advice and guidance and felt that a single point of contact who could advise them on which service or individual to access would enable them to direct their inquiries more efficiently and minimise the stress of not knowing where to go.

The 26+ group defined a 'go-to' person as someone who had a good idea about issues specific to mature students and could quickly signpost them to the correct source of support:

EK (26+): “Just somebody with a real name and an email address who will, is likely to reply to your email within the next week.”

This was viewed by all participants as an effective way to support mature students and to further improve the high quality of support that they felt they had received during induction.

Support networks beyond those provided by the formal course structures were discussed, including student-owned methods such as facebook groups. Participants found these useful as they could use this as a 'go-to' for information and support more quickly and informally than they could access the University.

There was general agreement that a mature students' facebook group would be useful, however, one participant felt that facebook was a 'bridge too far' as she did not have a facebook account and felt that to get one as well as the 'so many things you have to check every day' may be overwhelming for some mature students.

2.3 Wider University Services

2.3i Accommodation

The 21-25 group discussed accommodation at length, and this was an important part of their University experience. Students wanted clarity on whether mature student accommodation was an option, but they were unclear as to whether they had investigated this directly with the accommodation office.

One member of the parents group called for more information on where to look for housing, as she had seen PhD students on their students' facebook group who were moving to Bristol who were unsure of where to find accommodation or childcare. An official mature students' facebook account or page linked to the student group may be an effective means of signposting matures to the support services that they need.

In the 26+ group accommodation was only mentioned by one student who had been keen to find private accommodation and had asked the WP Office, rather than Accommodation Office, for help to know where to start.

In the stakeholder group the accommodation representative reported that as well as the University residences the Accommodation Office supplies information on finding private accommodation, and UBU has a private lettings service.

2.3ii Finances

In the 26+ group one student stated that finances were the most important factor for mature students who were seeking support as they put their earning potential on hold and do not have the same financial support as conventional students. She spoke anecdotally about other students who had found it difficult to find information from the finance office about what other funds were available to mature students, in particular from external sources such as charities.

In the stakeholder group BA discussed how the finance office signposts as much information as they can. Information is on their website and leaflets get sent to halls of residence and departments, but BA wondered if this sometimes went unnoticed by students.

BA acknowledged that there are students who feel they have not been made aware of support that they wish they had known about – BA thought this was exacerbated as students only seek out information once they are in financial trouble.

There is no area on their website which signposts students to external agencies such as charities. There had been an attempt to collate information about departmental funding so that students could find financial support relevant to their course, but the person commissioned to do the work never completed it. Feedback from the 26+ group suggested that there is a need for such a resource for mature students.

2.3iii Childcare Services

The parent group reported that University childcare places are very limited. Childcare was viewed as an essential service and support mechanism, and participants reported a pressing need for more places. One member suggested that student parents would be happy to run their own crèche if they were given a space.

Section 3 - Suggestions for improvements

Results from the focus groups demonstrated that there is a need for more clearly defined support for mature students.

Student and stakeholder participants proposed a range of suggestions for improvement of mature student support:

3.1 Signposting for mature students – a ‘go-to’ person

All three focus groups independently initiated discussions about a ‘go-to’ person specifically for mature students who understands various issues mature students may have, and who was available all year as a first point of contact who could signpost them to relevant services/people within the University.

3.2 Social support for mature students – a mature student society and a mature student specific buddy system

The three focus groups all stated a desire for more social support from University services.

All groups advocated a mature students’ society and expressed a desire to meet mature students from different departments in social settings.

A mature student buddy/parent system was also proposed in each group – members of the 21-26 group were keen to volunteer for such a scheme.

3.3 Raise the profile of mature students as a distinct group within the University.

Participants felt that the profile of mature students should be promoted throughout the University. This would improve integration and reduce feelings of being outsiders who need to justify their presence within the University. Targeted recruitment of mature students onto student societies was suggested.

Mature students thought staff should consider the extra skills and experience mature students may have which could be utilised on course.

A member of the parent group advocated a University drive to recruit more mature students, as a larger population of matures would help students to feel more integrated.

3.4 Promote wider understanding of mature student issues amongst staff across the University.

Stakeholders and students felt that understanding of the needs of mature students was inconsistent across the University - some formalised guidance may be useful to support staff.

Student and stakeholder participants advocated more formal recognition of the issues that are particular to mature students, and the development of formalised mechanisms such as flexibility around handing in dates and exam resits for matures.

Such flexibility for mature students should be clearly defined by departments, and queries from matures should be responded to as promptly as possible due to the added stress they may be under.

There is demand for timetables to be issued earlier, especially for student-parents, and for options to be available so that teaching hours at the extremes of the teaching day can be avoided.

3.5 Accommodation

Participants, particularly those aged 21-25, proposed the provision of accommodation specifically for mature students, or more formalised mechanisms for mature students to connect and make living arrangements with each other prior to arriving at Bristol.

3.6 Childcare places

The University childcare provision is oversubscribed and student parents require more places with greater flexibility in provision of places provided.

3.7 Widening Participation

Continue the specialist support provided through the Widening Participation office at all stages of the university career and in particular during induction. The Mature Student Advisor was reported to be a great source of support and participants were keen to find out who her replacement would be.

Induction sessions such as study support sessions, computer refresher courses, socials and current mature students speaking to the new cohort were viewed as excellent support mechanisms.

On reflection:

SJ (21-25) "I've been thinking over your project a lot since the focus group and something I was thinking of was whether it would be good to have a mature student representative within departments/schools at the university. I'm running for a course rep this year, and creating at least one role for mature students to voice issues and concerns is part of my manifesto and, regardless of whether I get the position, it will be a recommendation I intend to make to my department ... I think that as well as mature student representation at a wider level, i.e. within the union, creating this representation within departments may help tackle issues that relate to more specific teaching/programme structures etc, and enable departments to become more aware of the issues facing mature students. Even if this doesn't lead to any particular structural changes, at least this way mature students have a platform to raise concerns at a smaller level, as well as a larger, university-wide level."