

Exploring Widening Access for Mature Age Students

International Data, Experiences and Practices



David Baker, Lucy Ellis and Nazim Uddin

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GROWN-UP CONVERSATIONS

Understanding the Experience of Mature Students in Creative Arts Higher Education

Tim Gundry

Introduction

This chapter explores the complex topic of mature students and widening participation in UK higher education (HE). Despite the significant expansion of the university sector over the last decade, with greater access for some, mature student numbers have fallen, and notable inequalities remain evident in many of the performance indicators defined by the Office for Students, UK. This chapter considers some of the context surrounding these learners, before exploring the particular approaches within the creative arts being developed by Arts University Plymouth (AUP), UK. As a small specialist university, we place significant emphasis on a fully inclusive approach to learning and teaching and have developed a distinctive curriculum, underpinned by particular pedagogical principles that support and enable mature students to succeed in HE. Access and participation data over a seven-year reporting period, combined with insight from academic staff and current students, assists in exploring some of the pedagogy of our provision.

Research Methodology

The initial research behind this study was instigated as part of the work towards AUP's Access and Participation Plan (APP) required by the Office for Students in the UK to detail how HE Providers will improve equality of opportunity for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to access, succeed in, and progress from HE (Office for Students, 2018). It is widely acknowledged that mature students are 'disproportionately likely to be from disadvantaged or under-represented groups' (Office for Fair Access, 2017).

Access and Participation, and Graduate Outcomes data from AUP have been analysed and compared with data from the UK sector over a 7-year period from 2017/2018 to 2023/2024. As a small specialist university with approximately 1,000 undergraduate students, there are limitations to the significance of data analysis, so with ethical approval from the University's Research and Innovation Committee, qualitative and narrative enquiry approaches have also been undertaken. A survey issued to the 185 mature students enrolled in 2023–2024 recorded 52 responses (response rate of 28%), and one-to-one interviews were held with six of these respondents. Additional commentary was provided through discussion with a number of staff members who have had direct experience of supporting the learning of mature students at different levels in the University. Semi-structured interviews asked participants to talk freely and in detail about their experiences at the University and their comments have added an important perspective to this study.

Mature Learners in Context

Classed as students over 21 years of age at the beginning of an undergraduate course, mature students in the UK are typically a complex and diverse group of learners, who encompass a wide range of religions, races, educational backgrounds and, most notably, ages. Analysis shows that over half of mature students in the UK are aged between 21 and 24. The heterogeneous nature of this student group poses various challenges, both to institutions and to the Government (MillionPlus, 2018).

Broadly speaking, mature student numbers have been in decline. Various data sources have reported the historic reduction in mature learners in the UK, the total number of mature undergraduate students falling from more than 400,000 in 2010/2011 to fewer than 240,000 in 2017/2018 (Hubble and Bolton, 2021). Despite modest increases in the following 3 years, numbers have subsequently declined, most notably among those aged 30 and over. There has been a particularly steep decline in the numbers of those studying part time, which is of concern. Part-time study allows mature learners the opportunity to access HE while managing other commitments, and therefore plays a significant role in supporting widening participation (MillionPlus, 2018).

Some sources have suggested that the root of this decline can be traced to the funding changes implemented in 2012, which made HE less attractive for mature students (Gongadze et al., 2021). Economic concerns are undoubtedly a factor. Mature students have been described as being more debt averse, with maintenance costs often cited as a concern (MillionPlus, 2018). Importantly, mature students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to react to financial pressures by deciding not to enter HE (Hubble and Bolton, 2021). Even those from more financially comfortable backgrounds can view studying for a degree as a risk, with doubts as to the chances of success and the

long-term career benefits (Moore and Pollard, 2024). This is a particular concern in the Arts, where negative media coverage around the relationship between tuition fees and employability outcomes has almost certainly had an adverse impact on widening participation (Broadhead, 2022).

Sector data suggests that the decline in mature student recruitment is compounded by below average retention. Broadly speaking, mature students are ‘more likely than their younger colleagues to drop-out of higher education early’ (Bolam and Dodgson, 2003). This is clearly evident in the Access and Participation data reported by the OfS, which shows significant gaps in the continuation and completion rates between young and mature students (Office for Students, 2023).

There are various factors behind this disparity in student retention. Mature students enter HE for a broad range of reasons, and their expectations can be very different from those of their younger counterparts. They can have more complex support needs, and since they are typically more likely to work than those under the age of 21, they are disproportionately affected by the added pressure of work commitments. The increased incidence of parenthood and other caring responsibilities is another key factor (Pearce, 2017).

Gorad et al. (2006) identified a three-part framework to describe the barriers encountered by adult learners accessing and achieving in HE. As Broadhead (2022) notes below, this framework has particular relevance for economically disadvantaged adult learners and those from other underrepresented backgrounds.

- Situational barriers refer to practical challenges, e.g. cost and time commitments and other external factors
- Institutional barriers refer to typical inflexibilities and disincentives such as timetabling structures and support functions that are typically oriented around the needs of younger learners
- Dispositional barriers are particular to the individual learner and can often relate to previous educational experiences or personal issues

Given the challenges in recruiting and retaining mature students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, it is little surprise that numbers have fallen, and that there is a relative lack of published work exploring the impact of widening participation among this group of learners (Gongadze et al., 2021).

It is for this reason that AUP has initiated a research exercise to evaluate our own institutional experience of providing undergraduate Arts education to mature students. We have sought to better understand the complexities of this student group, the particular challenges which they face in our Art and Design context, and how they have been supported to achieve good outcomes.

Creative Education for a Changing World

AUP has a rich tradition of providing lifelong learning opportunities for mature students. From our origins as a traditional art school, through our transition from a vocationally oriented FE College into a specialist arts university, we have always placed significant emphasis on an inclusive approach to access and pedagogic practices that enable mature students from a range of backgrounds to succeed.

AUP's mature student population is typical for HE Providers in England (historically averaging approximately 29%) but against the noted national decline, this has risen over the last two years to 36.4%. Our mature student profile has some link to our geographic location. Mature learners tend to be more selective than 18- or 19-year-olds in their choice of institution, existing commitments in their local region often determining their choice (MillionPlus, 2018). Broadly speaking, the county of Devon in the UK has an ageing population, and the City of Plymouth has historically had high levels of employment in the armed forces and also health and social care. Over the years, we have recruited notable numbers of students who have left these sectors, enrolling on degree courses to pursue changes of career. Our subject specialism is also a factor. As Broadhead notes 'for many social, cultural and practical reasons, some adults choose to study Art and Design later in life' (Broadhead et al., 2019).

Our survey of mature students across our undergraduate provision revealed a number of interesting insights. 52% cited 'personal fulfilment, following a passion' as their primary motivation for enrolling on their degree course at the University, with only 9.6% citing 'to pursue a career change' as their reason. Analysis has revealed we have students who are studying for their second or even third degree. One notable mature student has two previous degrees in science and engineering but with a creative mind has wanted to study a creative arts degree purely for the experience.

This is reflected in the degree choices of mature students, with approximately 63% being enrolled on our three Arts based courses (Craft and Material Practices, Fine Art, and Painting Drawing & Printmaking). 61% of respondents were aged 50+, with a further 17% aged 40–49. Although nationally the largest decline in mature student numbers has been seen in the 30+ age bracket, older students constitute a significant proportion of our mature student cohort. There remains a noted decline in part-time student enrolments with 97% of our undergraduate students enrolling into full-time degrees. This reflects the national picture, where part-time student numbers have plummeted.

For those applicants with the required qualifications and/or skills evidenced through a portfolio of work, the University provides the option of a direct entry into the first year (level 4) of a 3-year degree, a route typically attractive and appropriate to those mature students who have prior educational attainment of professional experience.

For many mature students, however, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, their undergraduate journey begins on our 4-year Extended BA pathway, a supportive multidisciplinary experience that encourages learners to discover their passions and strengths within the creative arts, establishing purpose and direction. Students enrol into a specific named course, but with a largely common initial Level 0 year. This is attractive for mature students without standard entry qualifications, who may not have a suitably developed portfolio of creative work, but have the potential to develop their academic competency. In the seven academic years from 2017/2018 to 2023/2024, approximately 60% of students enrolling on the Extended BA course were classed as mature, significantly higher than our institutional average of approximately 29% over the same period.

The nature of the Extended BA pathway makes it an attractive and accessible route for students from underrepresented backgrounds. Over the same period, an average of 45% of the students enrolling on this course were recorded as being from IMD (Deprivation) Quintile areas 1 and 2, and 45% of the cohort were from POLAR4 (Participation) quintile areas 1 and 2. Over this same period, an average of 26% of the students enrolling on the course were recorded as having only previous life experience or no previous qualifications as their level of educational attainment. Nationally, UK providers record approximately 12.3% of their cohort as being students from areas with the lowest participation. For AUP, this figure is 21.1% (Office for Students, 2023). Our creative undergraduate cohorts are rich in backgrounds from all widening participation categories, but it is where background intersects with age where some of the most interesting insights have emerged.

The academic and demographic profile of this student group presents some obvious challenges. As Broadhead (2022) has noted ‘the academic canon associated with the Arts and Humanities can present barriers to students from underrepresented backgrounds’. The current course leader for the Extended BA programme agrees that this is one of the most significant pedagogical challenges. ‘Awareness of the Arts is often inextricably linked to [social] class. The combination of location and schooling means that many of our students have very limited understanding of Art and limited cultural awareness’ (Markes, 2024). This is one of the key challenges that our Extended BA seems to overcome, equipping students with a broad level of knowledge and understanding that will allow them to situate their emerging creative practice in a broader cultural context, and acquire the language skills to communicate their understanding.

Some of this understanding is achieved through interdisciplinary study, the benefits of which have been well documented, noted by Sperlinger et al. (2018) as providing strong emancipatory and participatory benefits in engaging students from disadvantaged backgrounds. While there are contrasting suggestions that interdisciplinary approaches in Arts and Design can present unwelcome challenges to mature students (Broadhead, 2022), interdisciplinary

thinking is central to the pedagogy of our Extended BA course. The emphasis on exploration, experimentation, and discovery is designed to increase cultural awareness and intellectual curiosity. Importantly, a key objective of the curriculum and delivery is to increase confidence. Our experience has shown that personal and academic confidence are fundamental to student success, particularly among those students who harbour negative experiences from secondary education and who arrive with ‘imposter syndrome’. The safe and supportive learning environment that encourages active participation and peer collaboration, irrespective of age or previous educational background, is fundamental to developing this confidence. The learning and teaching approach places a particular emphasis on the concepts of Belonging, Mattering and Becoming (Morgan and O’Hara, 2023).

Alongside interdisciplinary creative practice, the students receive an integrated programme of academic support covering a range of competencies including reading research skills, critical thinking, and academic writing. It is a tried and tested approach, now in its fourteenth year of delivery, which results in high levels of engagement and satisfaction. In 2023–2024, across the three satisfaction surveys undertaken across the year, our Extended BA cohort recorded the highest response rate (82%) and the highest overall satisfaction score (90.7%) of any course or any level of study. As one anonymous student noted in their feedback in the end of year survey:

I have really loved working with this amazing cohort and doing the Extended Year has really helped me to grow as a person and an Artist to help me use the skills and knowledge I have gained when on my chosen degree.

Notably, the course also demonstrates strong continuation statistics. In 2023–2023, 87% of the students successfully progressed onto their next level of degree study. Importantly, continuation rates are higher for mature students, with 91.3% successfully progressing that year. The increasing incidence of mental health issues has been reported across the sector and is one of the most notable factors driving poor continuation and completion rates in the UK. Despite the various situational and dispositional challenges described earlier, it seems that mature students also bring a marked level of drive and commitment to their studies and a resilience that enables them to manage their competing responsibilities, and overcome some of their personal barriers to learning. The current course leader for the Extended BA course commented:

I would say that most of our mature students on Extended BA have issues that impact their learning. In 2023–2024, 50% of our mature students had a declared disability at enrolment. There is also a significantly gendered dimension. We have a lot of men who are ex-military who have physical and/or mental health issues. We have a lot of older women who have various

caring responsibilities which adversely affect their attendance and engagement. Even those who can juggle these are sometimes having to contend with the effects of the menopause which can be genuinely debilitating. Importantly, while these mature students might have more to contend with, they are generally more willing and determined to try, they have more of a desire to overcome personal and mental health issues.

(Markes, 2024)

With such strong recruitment and retention of mature students from widening participation backgrounds through our Extended BA pathway, we have been interested to explore the progress and achievement of these students into their undergraduate degrees. Nationally, over seven academic years from 2016/2017 to 2021/2022, the Office for Students reported a notable gap in continuation rates between young and mature students. In 2021–2022, the continuation rate for young students was 89.8%, while for mature students, this figure was 80.5%.

At AUP, however, this picture is different. While a gap has been evident in some years, it has been much narrower than the national picture, and in 2021–2022, our mature students showed higher continuation rates 87.8% mature vs 86.4% young. This notable difference is evident in Figure 8.1. While the comparatively small sample size can result in significant variations year on year, the trend in contrast to the national picture is clearly evident.

Despite these broadly encouraging continuation rates, which show a narrowing of the gap between young and mature students, it has been noted that there are often complexities in the experience of older learners who can face various challenges related to identity and belonging (Gongadze et al., 2021), factors which frequently impact on their ability to persist with their studies. Mature students often feel as nervous as their younger counterparts for a range

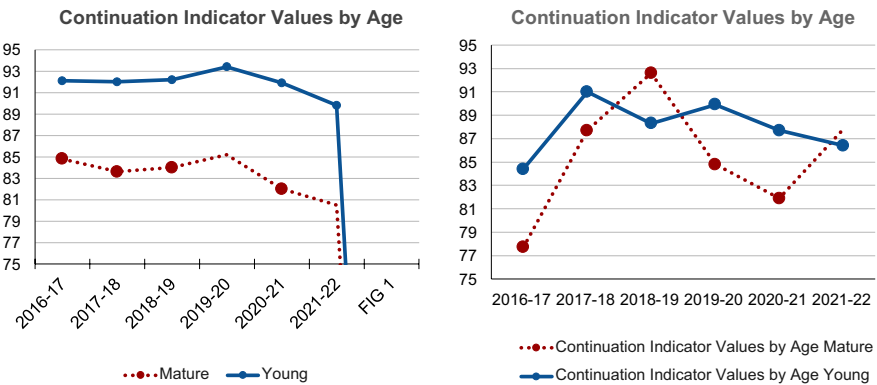


FIGURE 8.1 Comparison of continuation rates between mature and young students: All registered HE Providers vs AUP (Office for Students, 2022).

of reasons such as studying for the first time since leaving school, wondering if they will ‘fit in’ and whether or not they will be liked by the cohort. Often reluctant or unable to participate in social aspects of the University, typically oriented around younger learners, mature students can feel separate from their peers. These feelings can be more acute for older mature students as the culture and generational distances increase. As Pearce (2017) notes: ‘being as old as some of the staff, and having children as old as classmates are quite clear markers of difference, which will present challenges to integration’.

This has been a noted factor at our University, particularly among those subject areas (e.g. Animation and Games, Film and Screen Arts) which typically attract younger learners. A respondent in our survey, asked to comment on the most difficult and least enjoyed aspect of their experience noted: ‘not being able to communicate with the younger generation’ (Anon, 2024). This appeared to be a common theme in a number of responses and another student in one of the follow-up interviews explained:

I had to switch course from Film and Screen Arts, to Fine Art. As the oldest student there, I was left out of all group projects, and it seemed no one was sure how to talk to me. They didn’t put much effort into talking with me or getting to know me.

(Anon, 2024)

While not typical of feedback received, this and other comments received in student surveys, prompted careful consideration of the particular needs of mature students and how these are reflected in our approaches to fully inclusive learning and teaching.

The concept of ‘Belonging’ is a notable area of focus within the HE sector. As Morgan and O’Hara (2023) note ‘Belonging, Mattering and Becoming are instrumental in fostering self-actualisation and self-efficacy in learners’.

- **Belonging:** When students feel a genuine sense of belonging within an educational community, they are more likely to become open to self-discovery and growth, to believe that they have the intelligence and ability to succeed.
- **Mattering:** When students feel that they matter, and that their experiences and ideas are valued, they are more likely to overcome their imposter syndrome and develop self-efficacy.
- **Becoming:** This represents the process of self-actualisation, where students evolve, adapt, and grow, developing resilience, recognising the perseverance and passion involved in succeeding and achieving.

These concepts have been fully embraced in the pedagogical principles of the University, encouraging course teams to recognise themselves as being

responsible for the cultivation of transformative learning environments that provide a space for students of all ages and backgrounds to thrive Morgan and O’Hara (2023).

Alongside these principles, a group of students, in conjunction with the Students Union at AUP, have been encouraged to create a Mature Student Society, open to all students from all courses who categorise themselves as mature at the point of entry. The Society exists to provide a supportive and collaborative network and has proved a great success, helping to retain at least one known student who was considering withdrawing as she felt she did not fit in with her course cohort. The Society played a key role in the dissemination of our survey, and a number of students came forward to contribute narrative commentary to the exercise.

Considering the framework of barriers for mature learners, as outlined by Gorad et al. (2006) and expanded by Broadhead (2022), a central question in the survey enquired about the challenges encountered during the course of their studies. The response breakdown is shown in Figure 8.2.

Although rarely mentioned in much of the cited literature, the challenges with IT and Digital Literacy are a key issue for many mature students. Survey comments regarding the worst/least enjoyed aspect of the learning experience included: ‘Feeling stupid. My technology skills were outdated, and accessibility was a big issue’ (Anon, 2024). Digital literacy has become a widely discussed topic in the HE sector, and is regarded as integral to personal, academic and professional development. Students who develop digital capabilities are more effective in their study and more employable once they graduate (Advance HE, n.d.), and as such this has been identified as a key area of development for the University. Alongside our digital literacy framework, one of the

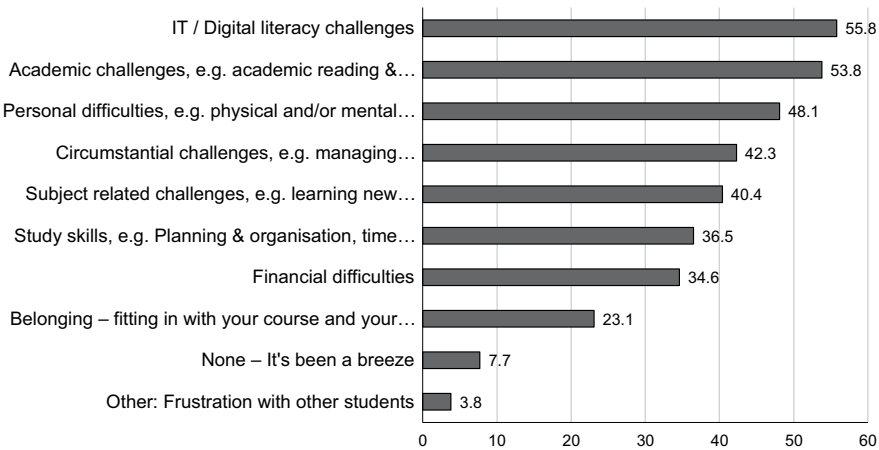


FIGURE 8.2 Analysis of survey responses (Arts University Plymouth, 2024).

underpinning attribute sets within our common unit curriculum, AUP has developed a number of initiatives to support students with the development of their digital literacy skills. Typically, well attended by our increasing number of mature students, our Digital Skills School takes place prior to the commencement of the academic year, giving students the opportunity to acquire basic computing skills and build their confidence before the course content starts. This is one of many initiatives developed and delivered by our Digital Education team.

For the most part our survey respondents report feeling well supported, with particularly positive feedback regarding our student experience functions such as the Library, Academic Skills and Student Support. Although we are a small university with limited resources, our size is a strength, allowing us to provide a level of personal support for individual learning needs. One respondent commented: 'I have felt fully supported, everyone I have encountered has been really accepting, friendly and happy to help - staff and students' (Anon, 2024). This commentary echoes the typical feedback that is recorded in other student voice mechanisms. In the recent National Student Survey, UK (NSS), 2024, where the University was ranked the top arts university in the UK in almost every category, and satisfaction scores are highest amongst those aged 31+. We have developed a learning environment where mature learners feel that they matter.

There are, however, issues evident in some of the commentary. While some respondents reported finding tutors 'very helpful and understanding about work commitments' (Anon, 2024), others felt that they were in a minority on their course and felt they were not treated in accordance with their age. One student reported: 'Good support with IT, study skills and academic challenges. Lack of support, however, with circumstantial challenges; poor communication regarding timetabling and advance notice of sessions and general lack of understanding regarding the commitments of life outside of university' (Anon, 2024). Some of these institutional barriers can be difficult to navigate and resolve. We have had to acknowledge that curriculum structures and delivery models do not always provide the flexibility that some mature students require.

When considering the experience that mature students bring to their studies, the majority of the respondents (85%) felt that their life experience before coming to university has helped them in HE study. As noted previously, mature students and their prior experiences have been known to positively contribute to group dynamics. 'They bring an attitude of hope and resilience that can often rubs off on the younger students' (Markes, 2024). One respondent reported feeling able to bring 'Maturity, discipline, logic, nutritional advice, personal and philosophical perspectives' (Anon, 2024), another replied: 'A wider perspective, emotional maturity, life experience, ability to self-manage & take personal responsibility, ability to work in a productive way as part of a team'. Many of our course leaders and lecturers attest to the view that when

mature students build upon their extended life experience in discussions, presentations, and other forms of group work, younger students benefit from the enriched learning environment (MillionPlus, 2018). As O’Shea (2018) notes, there is a need to recognise ‘older learners not as a group that is lacking but rather one that is replete with particular forms of experiential and embodied knowledge’.

The success of our approach to providing lifelong learning for widening access and mature students in the UK is ultimately measured by the OfS indicators. As noted previously, AUP performs well against Access and Continuation measures, and similarly positive performance is evident in our Completion statistics. Latest data shows that the national completion rate for mature students is 80%, whereas AUP is able to report a completion rate of 83.3% (Office for Students, 2023). This has improved significantly in recent years, now almost equalling the completion rate for our younger students (84.7%).

For some of our mature students the conventional notion of attainment, a ‘good degree’ is not important; they may be studying as a hobby, some having retired from their careers; they are often self-funded and some completing the degree for personal enjoyment or just to satisfy a long-held ambition. In terms of the degree outcomes that completing students achieve, there is across the sector an acknowledged attainment gap between young and mature students with older learners being less likely to achieve the HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) definition of a Good honours Degree (First Class and Upper Second). At AUP, however, there is no such attainment gap. Indeed, for the last three academic years of reported data, the attainment of mature students has exceeded that of younger students. Figure 8.3 shows our attainment profile against the average for all registered English HE Providers.

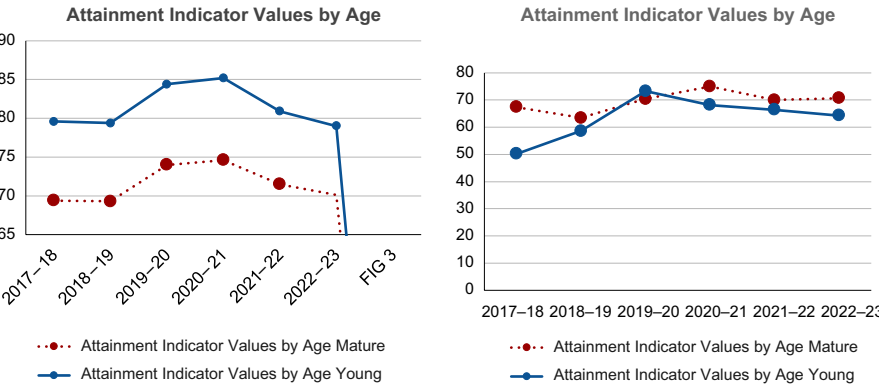


FIGURE 8.3 Attainment indicator values by age: All registered English HE Providers vs Arts University Plymouth (Office for Students, 2023).

A particularly positive trend is also evident in our Progression data, which shows that our mature students have higher rates of progression with a gap of *minus* 15.2% compared to our young students. This compares to a national gap of 2.8%. Evidence has shown that mature students are often stronger candidates for highly skilled/managerial/professional employment once they graduate. A higher number also progress into postgraduate study, also regarded as a positive progression outcome. 2020–2021 Graduate Outcomes UK survey data show 84.8% positive progression for mature students. In contrast, progression for younger students in the same period was 60.6% (Office for Students, 2022) (Figure 8.4).

Against all of the Office for Students indicators for the measurement of Access and Participation, the analysis of our data for mature students shows that AUP is succeeding in its stated mission to provide fair and equal access and lifelong learning opportunities for mature students, regardless of their background.

While feedback received from students reveals that there is still work to be done in certain areas, we can have confidence in the effectiveness of our approach.

In 2023, the University launched ‘Teaching for Our Time’, an essential strand of our strategic plan ‘Creative Education for a Changing World’, which captures the core principles that define our approach and method of teaching (Arts University Plymouth, 2024). Centred around three core principles of *Kindness*, *Authenticity* and *Fulfilment*, our pedagogical principles are concerned with establishing a dialogue between the individual and the wider world and providing a relatable and ethical model for students and staff. We recognise the need to provide the space, time, and resources to figure out what creativity might mean, and to nourish and sustain our students to thrive, embracing meaningful lifelong learning and the personal fulfilment that it brings. The demonstrable success of our mature students is a testament to these pedagogical principles.

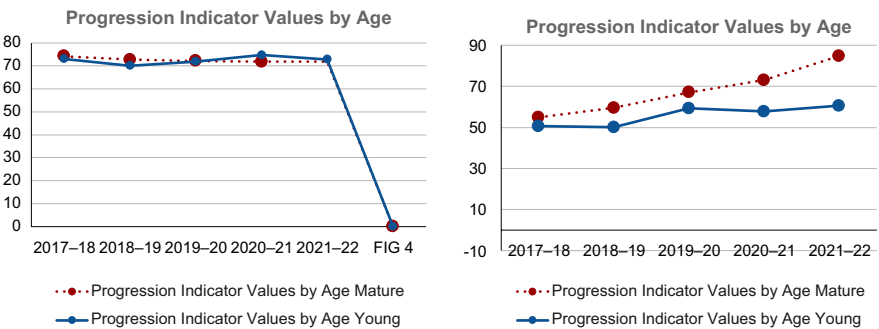


FIGURE 8.4 Progression indicator values by age: All registered English HE Providers compared with Arts University Plymouth (Office for Students, 2022).

Conclusion

AUP is committed to fair access and widening participation and aims to recruit students from all ages and backgrounds. We believe that a student community that reflects our society as a whole will benefit everyone. Maximising the participation of mature students in HE is fundamental to increasing social mobility. There are also strong economic arguments for ensuring that HE remains open and attractive to all age groups (MillionPlus, 2018). Since many of the workplaces and careers of the future require HE qualifications, it is vital that universities provide and support opportunities for older learners to develop their knowledge and skills.

Much of the literature around the experiences of mature students in HE is focused on the issues and challenges. Described as a ‘discourse of disadvantage’ (Woodfield, 2012), this focus on the problematic often ignores the resources that older learners usually possess, and the enrichment they bring to the HE learning community (O’Shea, 2018). We welcome and value the numerous positive contributions that mature students have brought to our University and reject the deficit model so often ascribed to students from widening participation backgrounds. As Brown (2021) notes ‘the sheer courage of tackling studying when you are atypical should be celebrated’.

Through our Extended BA pathway, we have created a route for mature students from a range of backgrounds to access HE and progress into meaningful lifelong learning. Across our undergraduate provision, we have welcomed mature students and developed distinctive pedagogies funded on key principles to support their learning. The outstanding rates of progression are evidence of our success in providing transformational learning opportunities that enable mature students to succeed in education and realise their creative and professional potential.

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