

SPECIAL FOCUS PAPER

# Learning Needs Including Preferences and Digital Technologies: A Study of Mature Students in Higher Education in England

Nick Papé<sup>1</sup> , Ilias  
Mahmud<sup>1</sup> , Rahaman  
Hasan<sup>2</sup>  (✉), Nazim  
Uddin<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Academic Department,  
London Churchill College,  
London, UK

<sup>2</sup>Christ Church Business  
School, Canterbury  
Christ Church University,  
Canterbury, UK

[rahaman.hasan@  
canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:rahaman.hasan@canterbury.ac.uk)

## ABSTRACT

Interviews with eight students individually returning to higher education later in life evidence a variety of personal drivers, including financial betterment, career advancement, personal amelioration, subject appeal, formal accreditation and network enlargement. Fashioned by earlier practices, professional goals and societal influences, these factors suggest a need for approaches marked by flexibility and digital integration, including platform-based tools, artificial intelligence (AI)-supported systems, cloud functionality and IoT-enabled resources. Prominence falls on wider societal contributions of governance innovation, ecological responsibility, healthcare improvement and commercial educational reform. With mature learners presenting marked expectations and contexts, attention re-focuses on technology-supported environments, climate-conscious content and practice-led teaching. The authors recommend further exploration in areas related to engagement, curriculum relevance and achievement enhancement.

## KEYWORDS

mature students, motivation, higher education, digital technology, inclusion, innovation, sustainability

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Higher education continues to be widely regarded as a means for personal development, intellectual expansion and professional advancement. For mature students, however, the decision to re-engage with formal education is often influenced by a complex interchange of internal aspirations and external demands. While some return to study out of intrinsic interest or long-standing educational goals, others are driven by changing labour market conditions or significant

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shifts in personal circumstances. Even when motivations appear comparable on the surface, their intensity and underlying causes can vary considerably between individuals.

This study investigates the drivers behind mature students' participation in higher education, with a particular emphasis on individuals from widening participation backgrounds. It examines how digital technologies might play a supportive role in supporting engagement and enhancing academic success. The independent tertiary education sector in particular has become a significant entry point for adult learners, many of whom bring rich personal and professional experiences that contrast markedly from those of traditional school-leaver learners. These mature students often face unique challenges and expectations, produced by factors of employment, family responsibilities or pauses in previous education.

As a result, higher education institutions are increasingly tasked with revisiting their expectations about learner needs. Established models designed for younger students may not adequately serve mature learners, who frequently require greater flexibility, recognition of prior knowledge and alternative entry pathways. This includes re-evaluating admissions criteria for those without formal qualifications and developing curriculum and support systems that acknowledge diverse learning routes. Tutors and academic staff play a critical role in advancing inclusion and persistence by offering guidance and support addressing adult learners' circumstances. By exploring what motivates mature students to return to education, this study aims to inform institutional policies for more inclusive and responsive teaching and learning practices.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The return of mature learners to formal study often involves a mixture of personal goals, professional interests and external pressures. With participation now including a wider mix of backgrounds, experiences and life arrangements, existing structures must adjust. Unevenness in prior schooling, employment patterns and personal responsibilities results in differing expectations, requiring alternatives beyond established methods. Material needs often feature prominently. Plans involving increased income, improved security, or advancement within a chosen field remain common themes [1]. Completion of conventional programmes is often regarded as a step toward greater access to opportunity, often supported by data showing improved prospects and steadier earnings for those with qualifications [2]. Concerns around affordability do remain strong. Calculations about tuition costs, loan burdens and lost income can weigh heavily on decisions [3]. These concerns frequently lead to arrangements where study takes place alongside paid work or depends on employer assistance to ease the financial liability [4]. These realities suggest that standardised approaches may no longer be adequate. Models that presume full-time availability, consistent prior preparation or minimal outside commitments may fall short of expectations. Instead, there is growing interest in study arrangements that adapt to less conventional pathways, allowing those with competing demands to engage on their own terms.

Osborne et al. [5] draw attention to the benefit of flexible course delivery, strong peer networks and policies built to help students persist with studies. For those returning after years away from study, pressures outside the classroom of family care, job schedules and/or the need to relearn academic habits create additional strain. Whether these needs are noticed and met often makes a marked difference. Not every enrolment stems from employment aspirations. For many students, interest in learning, curiosity or self-improvement motivates their return [36]. Ernest [6]

notes there is a tendency among older students to seek challenge and significant engagement. Satisfaction also tends to be higher among this group, according to Bell [7], who reports stronger appreciation for study among those with more life experience. These views reflect Freire's [8] idea that education enables a form of personal and social questioning, beyond simple content delivery.

Although digital tools now shape much of higher study, the human element remains critical. Hermanowicz [26] posits that direct communication, honest feedback and practical illustrations help sustain energy and interest. Questioning methods that draw students into reflective thought, as described in [27], help support learning that goes beyond surface engagement. Beyond individual input from tutors, broader institutional arrangements matter. Career help, academic advice and flexible scheduling often play a part in helping adult students meet their goals [28, 29]. These adjustments can ease the pressure of competing demands and improve the chances of staying enrolled. Technology, while useful, only succeeds when designed with care. Ossiannilsson et al. [23] stress that platforms must be clear, stable and suited to those unfamiliar with advanced digital tools. Blended formats and fully online options are increasingly chosen by students with full lives outside of education [23, 24]. Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), with their tools for interaction—forums, recordings and live discussions—encourage individual progress without removing the chance for collaboration [32]. Confidence in these tools varies; Scaffi and Rowley [25] show that doubts about quality and trustworthiness limit use, particularly among older groups less used to online formats. Belief in technology's ease, safety and usefulness appears essential. Tarhini et al. [30] extend earlier models to show that comfort with digital systems depends on their predictability, security features and ease of access. Compliance matters as well. Thorstad and Wolff [31] point to legal rules on personal data and emphasise the need for proper controls. Meanwhile, everyday tasks, from form filling to timetable checks, can become quicker and less frustrating through automation [24, 32].

Despite these improvements, issues continue. Not all students arrive with the same digital experience. Difficulties with new systems, or stress caused by having too much information at once, affect some more than others [19]. Uddin [20, 48] suggests that material grounded in everyday scenarios helps bridge the gap between theory and usefulness. Still, this method may prove hard to maintain where resources are stretched or staff time is limited [21]. Without the right level of support, even the best digital systems fall short. Kahu [22] warns that when a study is entirely self-paced, students may fall behind due to poor time habits or low morale. For adult learners, whose routines are often packed with other responsibilities, support must be planned with care. Systems that include regular check-ins, clear schedules and opportunities to speak with real people may help prevent dropout. Equal access remains another concern. Mature students may struggle with mobility issues, limited English, or care duties [33]. Where services and platforms include translation tools, screen readers, mobile access and on-demand help, more people are able to stay engaged. Institutions that act on these issues help ensure fewer people are left out of higher study [13].

In summary, adult involvement in higher education rests on a delicate balance of personal ambition, institutional response and digital preparedness. The move toward new delivery methods opens up choices but also demands care. Clear pathways, human contact, practical applications and adaptable systems remain key ingredients for student success. Where these are missing, the risks of drop-out, frustration, or unequal treatment increase. Ongoing review, along with input from students themselves, will remain essential in making learning a realistic and rewarding path for those who return later in life.

### 3 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

#### 3.1 Students preferences evidence

Studies show that the relationship between students and tutors plays an important role in how engaged learners are with their studies [7]. The rise of online learning platforms, artificial intelligence (AI) and adaptive learning tools has changed the way students connect with both their tutors and the course content. These technologies offer greater accessibility for mature students balancing work, education and family responsibilities. A strong connection exists between theoretical perspectives and student responses regarding their preferences for learning. Contextual research reinforces the credibility of findings by demonstrating consistency between reported experiences and established academic literature [11]. As digital tools continue to develop, mature students benefit from interactive learning environments, real-time academic support and AI-driven recommendations that personalise educational pathways.

#### 3.2 Rationale for contextual research

A clear rationale is an essential component of any research study [12]. Establishing the justification for research ensures that findings contribute to both theoretical knowledge and practical application. The integration of technology into education has transformed how mature students experience learning, making research into their motivations particularly relevant. The process of research often begins with a recognised challenge or knowledge gap, allowing new findings to build upon existing literature [14, p. 114]. As stated:

*‘... You are almost never the first person to try and answer an interesting research question ... if you are, the question may not truly be very interesting ...’*

Although the value of a research question is subjective, studies remain important when they challenge established beliefs or offer new applications. The literature review in this study ensures that prior research is not merely listed but actively critiqued [15]. Mature students cite a range of motivations for pursuing higher education. Family expectations, career ambitions *and* financial incentives frequently emerge as significant factors [16]. Several students highlighted these themes: ‘... I need to get out of the house ...’ (St 1); ‘... I’ve spent 21 years just being at home; I wasn’t working ...’ (St 1) and ‘... my mind was just going to sleep and studying anything was waking me up ...’ (St 2). These responses illustrate a strong connection between personal aspirations and domestic responsibilities [17]. Many students express conflicting emotions regarding their choice to enter higher education, viewing it both as an opportunity for growth and a challenge to existing family dynamics: ‘... I think over the years you forget what actually happened when you start looking after your family ...’ (St 2) and ‘... Being stuck in the house makes you forget how much brain power you have ...’ (St 3). Lastly, education is frequently described as a benefit not just for the individual but also for their family [18]: ‘... If I study more, my family will benefit ...’ (St 3). These reflections demonstrate how intergenerational learning plays a role in mature students’ motivation [34].

## 4 EXTRINSIC DOMAIN

### 4.1 Technology and motivation for learning

Advancements in digital education have made learning more accessible. Online courses, on-demand video lectures and interactive discussion forums allow students to customise their learning experiences. Adaptive learning technologies provide real-time feedback, helping students navigate complex topics. One student described the long-term nature of their educational ambitions: ‘... *When my daughter is older, I will go back to university and get my degree; that was my main motivator ...*’ (St 2). This suggests that some students experience delays in their educational journey due to personal responsibilities. Research indicates that students from certain backgrounds, including older learners and migrant students, often face higher dropout rates in online and blended learning environments [19]. However, developments in AI-driven tutoring systems help address these challenges by offering instant academic support and reducing feelings of isolation. For others, higher education is viewed as a professional stepping stone: ‘... *It will benefit my career and widen my scope of life ...*’ (St 5) and ‘*I ... want to become a professional with good credibility ...*’ (St 5). This matches with research suggesting that adult learners often pursue education for career progression [35].

### 4.2 Entrepreneurship and digital learning in business

Many mature students pursue higher education with the goal of starting or expanding a business. The rise of online business education, digital networking platforms and AI-driven market analysis tools has increased accessibility to entrepreneurial resources; ‘... *I started in the UK as a normal worker, then started studying entrepreneurship to make my future better ...*’ (St 4). Business courses in higher education help develop entrepreneurial skills by providing structured learning environments where students can test ideas, seek mentorship and engage with real-world case studies [9, 10]. However, one student expressed uncertainty regarding career direction: ‘... *Advancement in my career ... I should be able to manage projects and create a business plan ...*’ (St 3). Higher education often serves as a platform for career exploration, allowing students to develop skills before committing to specific professional paths. Another student reflected on the possibility of using education for both employment and business ownership: ‘... *This course gives me more chances of getting a different job or maybe even starting my own business ...*’ (St 8). Career decision-making is complex and influenced by confidence levels, economic conditions and institutional support [37]. The role of tutors in guiding students through uncertainties is particularly relevant, ensuring that learning remains connected to real-world applications: ‘... *The business course helps me understand business and plan my own business. Entrepreneurship is the best way to fulfil my goals in the future ...*’ (St 2). Entrepreneurial ambition is often shaped by economic and social factors. The development of digital incubators, crowd-funding platforms and business collaboration tools enhances the learning experience.

The general pattern of age differences in motivational factors indicates factors motivating self-employment are systematically intertwined with and embedded in both age and culture. The fear of losing ability due to the ageing process is counter-intuitive to those who consider expertise to increase with experience. However, for

this student, the ageing process seemed to be a challenge ‘... as I grew older, I was not able to do ... work efficiently ...’ (St 7). Minola et al. [38, p. 189] propose that the motivation for self-employment happens over a lifetime, being:

*‘... Intertwined with and in part an expression of the person’s general psychosocial development. This general development is a lifelong process from birth to late adulthood and follows certain normative timetables and developmental trends within biological and social potentials and constraints across the lifespan.*

So perhaps we can consider this as a feature of psychosocial rather than chronological development.

## 5 FINANCIAL MOTIVATIONS AND DIGITAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Financial incentives play a critical role in many students’ decisions to pursue higher education. However, concerns about tuition costs and student debt can act as deterrents [4]. One student reflected on financial struggles: ‘... I didn’t get finance for the whole time I was at College ...’ (St 2). The availability of digital financial planning tools, AI-powered scholarship search platforms and student loan advisory services can help students navigate these financial challenges. For some, the financial benefits of education are long-term considerations: ‘... I want to build a good career and secure my financial future ...’ (St 1). While research suggests that higher earnings do not always materialise immediately after graduation [1], students still perceive education as an investment: ‘... I sacrificed many things, including finance, to achieve what I wanted ...’ (St 2). New technologies, including block-chain-based academic credentials, offer greater transparency in employment markets, allowing graduates to validate their skills more effectively.

### 5.1 Networking and digital connectivity

The ability to connect with peers and professionals is another significant motivation. digital platforms, including LinkedIn, alumni networks and virtual study groups, provide valuable networking opportunities: ‘... Socially, I’m meeting people and learning lots of things ...’ (St 4). Building relationships with peers enhances both academic engagement and career prospects [39]. The introduction of AI-powered career services in higher education institutes enables personalised networking opportunities, helping students establish industry connections: ‘... Now I have friends, we go to the cinema, the park together ...’ (St 1). This demonstrates that higher education is not just about learning but also about developing social and professional networks.

## 6 INTRINSIC OR AFFECTIVE DOMAIN

### 6.1 Personal aspirations and educational transformation

Regulatory demands in higher education can often restrict students’ personal goals. Hassel and Giordano [40] argue that this tension may be reduced through roles including student affairs specialists, designed to support individual needs within broader service structures [41]. Many students identify personal development as

a central aim of their studies. ‘... *I wish to become a better person ...*’ and ‘... *it [studying] will personally make me happy ...*’ (St 1) reflect the importance of education for self-fulfilment, ideally supported by engagement officers. Bauman [41] also cautions against treating students purely as consumers, stressing the importance of balancing student-centred approaches with the integrity of educational challenges. Personal change is a consistent theme among mature learners. One student noted, ‘... *I’m a very outspoken person, it helped me realise [I am] that at home ...*’ (St 5), indicating growth in self-awareness. This is deepened by reflective learning: ‘... *I’ll have to really think and think so that I don’t forget the question ...*’ (St 5). Their responses point towards a focus on self-development and a willingness to step beyond comfort zones. Though tutors and peers contribute, students often emphasise their own role in initiating change, embracing autonomy in their learning journey. Even without a background in formal secondary education, mature students display readiness for academic growth. ‘... *Life is changing, so the old way will not do, [as] it is different from now ...*’ (St 3) captures this adaptive mindset. According to Most and Wellmon [42], foundational education prepares students for specialisation, but it is the individual’s engagement that drives transformation. Education encourages active participation in personal development, not just academic achievement.

## 6.2 The dream of transformation

Mature students often enter higher education seeking transformation, professionally and personally. Digital education environments have opened up greater flexibility, helping students balance study with existing responsibilities. This has enabled learning to become a tool for redefining identity. ‘... *Changing the status quo.*’ (St 2), ‘... *Be a master in my own life ...*’ (St 8), ‘... *I can make myself something ...*’ (St 6), ‘... *Be able to gain a sense of achievement ...*’ (St 5) and ‘... *To be able to react professionally ...*’ (St 7) all reflect aspirations to grow, achieve and take control. Non-traditional learners often seek advancement and self-actualisation [43], although optimism around career outcomes can be misplaced. Cassar [44] notes that mature students may overestimate short-term business success, yet the ambition to improve remains strong. ‘... *My own personal development and career ...*’ (St 1) and ‘... *Those sorts of things make you perfect ...*’ (St 7) reveal how students blend personal goals with career hopes. Digital learning technologies, including AI-based tools, allow learners to chart their own paths, explore diverse topics and develop new competencies.

## 6.3 Enjoyment of learning and subject content

Enjoyment of study itself is a strong motivator. Learning becomes more effective when it connects with personal interests and preferred learning styles. Students respond positively to interactive and real-world learning strategies. ‘... *I prefer where teachers give examples and can leave the group with a case study to read ...*’ (St 8) and ‘... *Yes, this case study and question I like ...*’ (St 1) demonstrate a clear preference for practical application. Digital tools, interactive platforms, multimedia content and personalised AI learning systems enhance the learning experience. These technologies keep learners engaged through responsive content. ‘... *I am really good at studying ... so I joined up, and I loved studying business ...*’ (St 2) and ‘... *Spending time together in study is a fun time ...*’ (St 6) reinforce the emotional satisfaction student’s gain from their studies. Arnone et al. [45] argue that curiosity and engagement in

technology-rich learning environments significantly boost motivation. This is echoed in the creative use of digital platforms: ‘... I uploaded the photo ... online and think I like I; I love it ...’ (St 6).

#### 6.4 Social Learning and Collaboration

Collaboration is another significant element of student experience. Digital platforms enable real-time group discussions, peer reviews and community interaction. Students value these collaborative spaces: ‘... I say teamwork is what I like as well ...’ (St 4) and ‘... My personality preference is being in a learning group ...’ (St 1). These environments promote collective learning and deeper understanding. ‘... The students got to understand the topics better as they saw different sides to the arguments; the argument brought us together, so the debate is very good ...’ (St 8) illustrates how discussion enhances academic comprehension. Digital tools, AI companions, automatic feedback systems and virtual classrooms help build critical thinking skills: ‘... This is not this way; you have to go look for that way, that’s why I think this use of questions is much better ...’ (St 7). Beyond academic collaboration, digital platforms also support social engagement and friendship: ‘... I’m meeting some people and socialising as well; so great, I found some good friends ...’ (St 4). These social bonds contribute significantly to the overall educational experience.

#### 6.5 Future aspirations and digital tools

Students frequently link education to long-term aspirations, whether in business, employment, or social contributions. Digital career development tools, AI-driven job matching platforms and online business planning resources support students in translating academic learning into real-world opportunities: ‘... The study in entrepreneurship is making my future nicer. If I am able to do any business, then I think it will be better for me ...’ (St 3). Planning for the future requires long-term decision-making skills, which are increasingly supported by AI-powered career guidance and financial forecasting tools. Research suggests that thinking about future consequences improves decision-making and goal-setting [31], ‘... I have to study; I have to just study ...’ (St 3). Some students focus on career fulfilment over study enjoyment, reflecting the balance between professional aspirations and academic engagement: ‘... I’ve actually got a job in marketing, market research at the moment ... I’m enjoying that more ...’ and ‘... The business side of it, sort of taking a side-track ...’ (St 2). For students who remain committed to education despite challenges, digital technologies provide flexible solutions. Mobile-friendly learning platforms, interactive business simulations and real-time professional mentorship bridge the gap between academic studies and industry expectations.

#### 6.6 Certification and professional credibility

For many students, achieving a qualification represents more than academic success; it enhances professional credibility and career prospects. Research suggests that digital credentialing systems, including blockchain-based academic records, will increase trust and transparency in education [45]: ‘... I wanted to receive a certificate and knowledge from the course from the beginning ...’ (St 8) and ‘... The application

*of my higher education becomes more credible in my workplace ...'* (St 5). The pursuit of formal recognition through certification is an essential part of career advancement, especially as digital platforms offer micro-credentialing and specialised training programmes that support lifelong learning: *'... If I study more, my family will benefit, my friends will benefit, my community, everything ...'* (St 3). Evidence shows that formal qualifications are closely linked to professional success, often resulting in higher incomes and more stable career paths [2].

## 6.7 Sharing knowledge and supporting others

A number of participants describe a drive embedded in offering ideas, passing on understanding and assisting others in their development. The spread of web-based spaces, mutual aid arrangements and collective contribution methods reinforces the notion that learning holds value beyond the individual. One account illustrates this clearly: *'Learning is being able to take something that somebody said, maybe use it somewhere else ...'* and *'... It's a skill, being able to take that and transfer it into some other way ...'* (St 2). Remarks of this kind reveal a preference for putting what is gained into action, especially in areas where exchange, peer advice and hands-on dealings play a major part. Another comment captures this idea from a more personal angle: *'... I can also use the knowledge on various personal occasions, helping my friends to make plans ...'* (St 5). These examples suggest that study does not remain restrained to formal sessions but often reaches into daily experience. With wider availability of digital study routes, this pattern becomes more evident. Activities shaped around case-based challenges, directed exploration and smart assistance tools allow for engagement that moves beyond passive receipt and into practical research and collaborative contribution.

## 6.8 Conclusion and further research

This study considers what prompts later-life returnees to re-enter formal study, bringing attention to methods shaped by different requirements. Knowles's [13] outline positions adult returnees as independently driven, formed by long-term background and motivated by hands-on usefulness. This indicates a need to move away from standard procedures designed with school leavers in mind, toward approaches that reflect varied backgrounds and preferences. In response, many institutions refine online setups and modify delivery. Tools involving artificial systems, remote-access platforms and device-linked networks offer possibilities for autonomous involvement while still providing organised pathways. Providers continue to favour formats that accommodate multiple daily responsibilities. Reasons for entry include work-related ambitions, mental challenge, household stability and personal aims. Mezirow [46] and Taylor's [47] reflections highlight how meaningful moments often occur when usual assumptions are tested and rethought. In response, learning venues may choose to expand remote access spaces with greater reach and practical use. Options might include home-based entry, adjustable planning and device-friendly materials. Compatibility with Android, iOS and Windows remains crucial for those moving between locations. Smart systems and cloud-based support now provide real-time help and updates. This allows students to monitor change, review needs and make adjustments. These same platforms also allow teaching staff and support

teams to respond to patterns in activity. Systems with one login and simplified tools for navigation reduce stress, especially where familiarity with technology is limited.

Collaboration with Jisc, OfS and HESA helps ensure that requirements across the UK are followed and that changes in digital developments are monitored. At the same time, smooth operations behind the scenes make a clear difference. Much routine work remains time-dependent and slow to be completed. Replacing this with automatic systems, digital documents and remote interfaces reduces waiting times and increases availability. Legal guidance must also be observed, including obligations linked to the prevent duty and GDPR. Wider value also emerges beyond personal advancement. By including material connected to environmental thinking and promoting change-focused topics, providers contribute to developments in health, public structures and responsible willingness. Where digital practice, technical studies and numerical processing are taught together, better preparation for studied problems becomes possible. Direct exchanges between tutors and students remain a key ingredient in continued progress. Whether a student stays enrolled, feels encouraged or achieves milestones often depends on these interactions. Those with experience working with mature learners show a clearer awareness of what helps or hinders the process. Encouragement, timely responses and confidence-building go a long way in supporting those who may have stepped away from formal study for some time.

Future work might look more closely at how digital methods shape morale, especially when learning takes place remotely or through hybrid models. It may also help to examine the effect of artificial systems on continuation and response levels. Interest also remains in whether lessons connected to environmental topics steer decisions around future work or study areas. Added attention may be given to the ways personal connections assist in business or work changes. For this reason, topics around group support, course adjustments and contact networks could produce useful findings. Finally, short-form credentials and digital proof of study may offer another route to opportunity, especially for those returning to work after time away.

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## 8 AUTHORS

**Nick Papé** is with the Academic Department, London Churchill College, London, UK (E-mail: [nick.pape@lcc.ac.uk](mailto:nick.pape@lcc.ac.uk)).

**Ilias Mahmud** is with the Academic Department, London Churchill College, London, UK (E-mail: [i.mahmud@lcc.ac.uk](mailto:i.mahmud@lcc.ac.uk)).

**Rahaman Hasan** is with Christ Church Business School, Canterbury Christ Church University, Canterbury, UK (E-mail: [rahaman.hasan@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:rahaman.hasan@canterbury.ac.uk)).

**Nazim Uddin** is with the Academic Department, London Churchill College, London, UK (E-mail: [n.uddin@lcc.ac.uk](mailto:n.uddin@lcc.ac.uk)).