



# Returning to learning: the importance of creating compassionate and collaborative spaces for students re-entering education

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## ***Abstract***

This case study focuses on the importance of creating compassionate and collaborative spaces for students re-entering education. It highlights the growing body of mature and non-traditional learners in UK higher education institutions and addresses how these students are recruited to universities and supported after enrolment. Key concerns about the expectations and assumptions of these students' prior abilities, and the importance of offering a safe space to rekindle a joy of learning, are also discussed. The case study focuses on the Returning to Learning initiative in a North-West university which actively engages returning learners by inviting them to be part of an informal community of positive support. Reflections on the process of designing, delivering and assessing the value of this learning community will also be shared, alongside suggestions for a more formal evaluation of the impact of this initiative.

**Keywords:** returning to learning; mature students; non-traditional students; joy of learning.

## ***Introduction***

The most recently available Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (2024) data show that in the 2022/2023 academic year more than a third (36.9%) of students in the UK were over 25 and 23.4% were over 30. Recent research has also suggested that globally the over-50 age group is the fastest growing demographic of adult learners (Heretick and Tanguma, 2021). There is therefore a real need to recognise this large and growing community of adult and mature learners and to focus on enabling them to have the best

experience of learning in higher education (HE). Literature shows that students who return to study after a break from education are often found to be particularly motivated, self-determined, focussed and hard-working (Hunter-Johnson, 2017; Kasworm, 2018). HE has the power to be transformative for this group of students, by raising self-confidence, increasing positive self-image and offering a sense of purpose (Webber, 2015).

### ***Rationale: the need for compassionate and collaborative spaces***

Current university student recruitment strategies often fail to consider the complex needs of mature learners (Bellare et al., 2023). While many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) attract mature learners by offering practical advice on how to access HE and the application process, they frequently fail to continue to provide relevant support for these students after enrolment. Mature students often also have additional external commitments such as caring responsibilities or the need to earn a living, and these complex demands inevitably impact upon their experience as students (Webber, 2015; Busher and James, 2020; Saddler and Sundin, 2020). However, when mature and non-traditional students feel that they belong and that they are well-supported (especially during their first year of academic study), they are less likely to drop-out and are more likely to be successful (Servant-Miklos, Dewar and Bøgelund., 2021; Casanova et al., 2023). Embracing the diversity in student populations and creating collaborative spaces for all learners to be accepted, respected, and included, is the first step in creating environments which kindle a joy of learning (Omidire, Aluko and Mampane, 2021).

Despite the high percentage of mature students enrolling each year, current university structures are not designed with these students in mind. Graduate employability appears to be a key selling point for many HEIs and has arguably become the focus of, rather than an additional benefit to learning (McCowan, 2015). Even literature on student experiences suggests that the role of the university is to 'prepare students for the future world of work' (Calma and Dickson-Deane, 2020, p.1223), which neglects to consider learners who are retired, unable to work, or do not need to seek employment post-graduation. Indeed, compulsory 'preparation for workplace'-style modules are often not appropriate for many (especially mature) students, and it is these structural barriers that can make students feel that university is perhaps not for them. While for many mature learners the opportunity to improve employment opportunities is still a key draw to HE, there are also numerous

students in this category who simply want to learn, with no ulterior end goal. This joy of learning is an intrinsic motivating factor in enabling students to get the most out of their studies.

When students are genuinely interested in gaining knowledge, despite any challenges or adversities that may arise, joy can emerge and can also act as a driving force to learn more (Cronqvist, 2024). However, when universities focus heavily on promoting the employability of their graduates, they risk treating students like customers and ultimately disregard the real value of the higher education experience (Matthews, 2018; Calma and Dickson-Deane, 2020). It is noteworthy that when universities evaluated their customer-centric model of education, students identified 'kindness, integrity and understanding' as the most important things that would improve their experience and highlighted the importance of recognising that everyone comes with different experiences, prior learning, and backgrounds (*The Guardian*, 2018).

Traditional educational structures repeatedly make assumptions about students' prior knowledge and digital capabilities. Failing to recognise the amount of time and support needed for non-traditional learners (for example, mature students) to adjust can often leave them feeling overwhelmed and at higher risk of leaving (Casanova et al., 2023). Recognising that attrition rates are higher within the non-traditional entrant demographic, universities have a responsibility to recognise how best to support the transition phase into university for this group (Gill, 2021). Merrill (2015) also highlights the importance of HEIs offering accessible spaces and support for diverse student groups, noting that adult students want to feel accepted and part of their university community. Alongside any academic concerns, mature students can also become anxious about integrating with their peers as they may experience a sense of separateness from the younger students (Gregersen and Nielsen, 2023). Gregersen and Nielsen (2023, p.85) highlight that 'being a mature student is more than a specific age or life situation: it is also a way of being a student, that is, an intersection of age, life situation and ways of engagement.' It is therefore imperative for HEIs to offer a safe space for these learners to discover and begin to inhabit their developing new identities as mature university students. Creating supportive spaces to nurture a joy of learning is achieved by ensuring that teaching and learning environments reflect the wide-ranging identities and experiences of all students (Omidire, Aluko and Mampane, 2021). These are the underpinning principles upon which the Returning to Learning initiative is founded.

## **Context**

As an Academic Skills Advisor (ASA) I offer one-to-one academic writing support for students from pre-entry to graduation, and from foundation level to taught postgraduate. In this capacity I meet numerous students who start one-to-one sessions by declaring that they have been out of formal education for many years and expressing apprehension about returning to study. Reflecting on my own experience as a mature student, and despite working in HE for many years, I also felt many of the anxieties and pressures linked to being a student who has been out of taught education. It is a combination of this personal experience and anecdotal evidence that convinced me to advocate for a way of targeting academic skills support at mature learners in a way that is accessible, friendly and focusses on rekindling a joy of learning. In 2019 the idea of Returning to Learning (R2L) was born, with the key focus being to create a supportive community of practice.

### ***Returning to Learning: in practice***

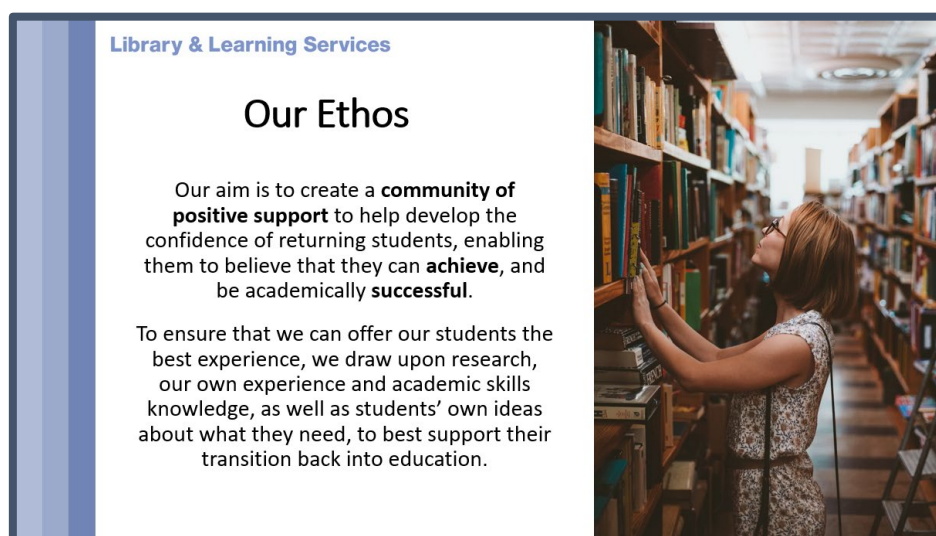
Returning to Learning (R2L) was designed to offer a safe space for students re-entering education, to enable them to reconnect with learning and share their experiences with others in the same position. Recognising that many mature learners may be anxious about attending any kind of group session, it was essential to create a compassionate space. To ensure a relaxed, informal, and welcoming environment, refreshments are provided and the accessible physical space always has an open door. It currently takes place as a face-to-face session, on alternate Wednesday afternoons throughout the year (see Figure 1). Sessions can be booked in advance, or students can just turn up on the day.

Figure 1. Returning to Learning poster



It is important to appreciate that students who are returning to learning need services that offer targeted support, tailored to their needs and at key times throughout their study (Heagney and Benson, 2017). Experience has also shown that given the right encouragement and access to support, all students have the potential to achieve, regardless of their age or stage in life. This evidence underpins the development of the Returning to Learning ethos (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Ethos slide from R2L session.



The community of practice structure of this face-to-face workshop also reinforces the importance of encouraging peer support (Mishra, 2020), allowing students to share their own knowledge and tips, as well as receiving support from others. Sessions are facilitated by an ASA and a Student Advisor (SA). As current students at the university themselves, SAs can offer invaluable insights. Working in partnership with students to create a community of learners allows students themselves to identify and take ownership of what is important to them (Dickerson, Jarvis and Stockwell, 2016). Omidire, Aluko and Mampane (2021) also found that supporting and sharing ideas with peers is an effective way to ensure joy within the learning process. No assumptions are made about students' prior experiences or their current academic skills, and sessions are focussed on creating a compassionate and supportive space. Students know best what works for them and we, as Learning Development practitioners, can learn by listening to their experiences, which will ultimately enrich our own practice (Webster, 2023).

### ***Reflections: design and delivery***

R2L was designed to be informal, with the emphasis on facilitating conversation, and the time is predominantly focussed on relaxed whole-group discussion. The ASA always enables space for students to ask any questions, or offer their thoughts or ideas, and the lack of formal structure enables the ASA to be led by the students. Each student comes with different apprehensions, queries, or anxieties, so enabling students to ask any questions they have and to direct the flow of the session themselves ensures a compassionate and supportive space. The importance of offering guidance and support, especially during an induction period is noted by Merrill (2015, p. 1870) as something which can 'enhance the learning experiences and adjustment to university life'.

R2L sessions began in February 2020, but only two sessions took place before the start of the pandemic and lockdown. While online delivery of this session was necessary for a while, it became clear that R2L needed to be delivered in a face-to-face environment. Recent research by Webber (2024) demonstrates that students value being on campus and that this reinforces their identity as learners. The difficulty of running a drop-in style session online was that students were likely to join either at the start of the session, or not at all. Turning up mid-way through an online workshop is not something that students felt comfortable with. The concept of a community of practice is also usually envisaged in a

physical space, and while this was not possible during the pandemic, it was vital to ensure that once students returned to campus, so did this session. It is not only the collaborative nature of a community of practice that is important, but its face-to-face nature.

Returning to Learning originally ran as a face-to-face learning community workshop for 2 hours (2-4pm) on the first Wednesday of every month throughout term time. Post-Covid this increased to alternate Wednesday afternoons during term, and after feedback from attending students and SAs it was moved to the more accessible time of 1-3pm. Since the start of the 2023/24 academic year R2L now runs all year round (apart from during the Winter and Spring breaks) to encompass the wide-ranging year-round courses and intakes that Edge Hill University offers. This increase in our R2L offer demonstrates that we recognise the value of creating accessible spaces which support all our students to rekindle a joy of learning.

### ***Reflections: the value of a learning community***

Despite initial logistical and practical barriers, R2L has proved beneficial for not only the students attending, but also the ASAs facilitating the R2L learning community sessions. Webber (2024) recognises the importance of valuing collaborative peer communities as spaces which enable staff to facilitate a sense of university learner identity in students, and for students to develop their academic skills and confidence. For ASAs involved in the delivery of R2L this has been a real labour of love, as all of us have experience of studying as mature students, and a real passion for supporting this group of non-traditional learners. Being able to create this compassionate and collaborative space has elicited genuine joy within ASAs facilitating these sessions, as we are able to see firsthand tentative new learners grow into their student identity and fully embrace a joy of learning again. Pedagogies of kindness such as this can create environments where students are more engaged and have a better chance of flourishing (Stephens, 2023).

Reflecting on the value of learning communities, it was also important to evaluate the effectiveness of Returning to Learning from the students' point of view. Consequently, a specific R2L evaluation survey was designed and instigated for the 2023/24 academic year. This short online survey was emailed to attendees after each session and it invited students to comment on their reasons for attending, what they got out of the session, if

they intended to return, and whether they would recommend R2L to others. It is important to acknowledge that while many attendees anecdotally shared their positive reactions to R2L, only a small number across the year also responded to the formal feedback survey ( $n = 10$ ). This is perhaps indicative of traditionally low response rates to online surveys (Shiyab et al., 2023), or possibly reflects the growing issue of feedback fatigue among university students (Field, 2020; Fass-Holmes, 2022). Those who did offer formal feedback noted a range of reasons for attending, including accessing help and support, meeting other mature students, and being part of a community. One student specifically noted, 'I was feeling quite overwhelmed and stressed about studying again. I wanted to meet others that were returning to education too to share experiences'.

Peer relationships at university are recognised as an essential way of students feeling valued and respected (Gravett and Winstone, 2022), which can foster opportunities for a more joyful learning experience. Students found the R2L space to be reflective of these opportunities and one student highlighted that, 'it also helped with my well-being to just chat with people who had also took [sic] a break from education. I was able to relate to them and I really enjoyed the discussions'.

Indeed, during the 2022/23 academic year a diverse group of students who attended R2L regularly throughout the first term bonded so well that they set up their own WhatsApp group so they could stay in touch and support each other outside of R2L sessions. Additionally, one of the current 2024/25 R2L attendees has been attempting to reinstate a Mature Students Society and is now being supported by all the other attendees to achieve this goal. Cronqvist (2024) recognises this social context of engaging with a community and working together to achieve shared goals as a way of eliciting more joy in the learning process.

The community of practice structure also enables students to voice concerns in a safe space, and one student noted that they planned to attend future sessions, as their first experience of R2L was, 'so helpful and I feel I can ask those questions in a small group that I perhaps would not feel comfortable to do in lectures or other areas'. This response reinforces the idea that being part of a learning community enables students to get to know each other on a deeper level, which helps to build mutual respect and trust (Juusola, 2023). When invited to comment on whether they would recommend Returning to Learning to others, 100% of the survey respondents said 'Yes'. One of the students commented, 'I

feel other “returners” would definitely feel a sense of calm reassurance by attending’ and another suggested that it was ‘really great for those who haven’t studied in a long time in a supportive and open forum of a session’. These comments are indicative of the compassionate nature of this community of positive support, and reinforce Busher and James’ (2019) findings that creating spaces for mature students returning to education enables them to develop collaborative and empathetic identities while they become effective independent learners.

## ***Conclusions and recommendations***

While those who did respond to surveys all offered incredibly positive feedback, it is important to acknowledge that further evaluation to measure the success or impact of R2L as an intervention could be beneficial. It would be especially interesting to investigate the long-term impact of returning learners being supported throughout their university journey in a compassionate and caring space. The limited engagement with formal emailed evaluation surveys, and the potential issue of feedback fatigue, also suggests that alternative methods to objectively measure or evaluate impact should be considered.

However, the lack of comprehensive formal evaluation does not take away from the clear benefits of providing a caring and compassionate space in which to rekindle a joy of learning among our students. The continued increase in numbers of mature students entering the university, alongside the positive feedback from these sessions, demonstrates a clear need for ensuring that compassionate and caring spaces such as Returning to Learning are available, accessible, and visible to students. One survey response sums up the many enthusiastic and positive reactions to R2L. When asked what they got out of attending Returning to Learning, this student declared ‘that it’s never too late to start anything in life, you just need to have the right mindset and set your goals to achieve it’, arguably a piece of wisdom applicable to us all.

## ***Acknowledgements***

The author did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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