



Including mature students: the creation of an online resource tailored to the mature student experience

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Presentation abstract

A sense of belonging in higher education has long been recognised as an important factor in academic success (Allen et al., 2024). Supporting students' sense of belonging is crucial for fostering engagement, motivation, and retention (Strayhorn, 2019). Mature students are a cohort who generally report lower levels of sense of belonging (Erb and Drysdale, 2017) and often face unique challenges related to balancing studies with work or family responsibilities, or navigating generational gaps with fellow students (Kasworm, 2008). It is, therefore, important for universities to develop inclusive learning environments that reflect and value the diverse needs and perspectives of mature students in order to increase a sense of belonging for this group of students.

This presentation reported on one such attempt to develop an academic skills resource tailored to the mature student experience. The Mature Student Skills Resource is an interactive, online resource aimed at enhancing the academic skills of mature students by introducing strategies and tools for group work and time management. The project was initiated by the Mature Student Advisory Board, a group of current students who work together to improve the experience of mature undergraduates at the University of Leeds. The final resource is the result of a collaboration between colleagues from the Learning Development Team, the Lifelong Learning Centre and the Digital Education Service. Since the launch of the resource in November 2023, evaluation activity undertaken with mature

students demonstrates that although it is appreciated and valued, the resource is not yet having the intended reach and resulting impact.

As well as demonstrating the resource, this presentation outlined the benefits and challenges of working both with students and colleagues from other teams to realise the original, student-initiated brief. It also shared insights from student evaluation and next steps to develop the resource further.

Keywords: mature students, co-creation, study skills, group work, belonging.

Community response

While mature students are defined by HESA as those who enter university for undergraduate studies at the age of 21 or older and postgraduate studies at the age of 25 or older, your work clearly shows the need to remember that labels like 'mature' overlook diversity of age/experience/concerns/interests. Creating generic materials for a diverse student population takes into consideration the nuances of the population that are engaged in the activities.

The resource itself, along with the journey of creating and evaluating it, was really interesting, showing not only the learning developers' viewpoint but also those of the students who have been involved in the project and those who have accessed the resources. The way that you considered not only the positive of the project and its successes, but also future development opportunities shows a level of understanding on the helpfulness of these resources for this particular group of students and gives others the opportunity to learn from your own experience as they look to replicate your work. It is also great to see how the mature students' advisory board are able to support you and themselves through this project and potentially into further initiatives.

The focus on group work continues to be of interest to all within the community as there is a constant need to balance the dislike of group work within the student population and the need for students to have the ability to work with others (Davies, 2009). This seems to be amplified for mature students who sometimes feel pressured to take the lead in group

work. It also seems that the majority of mature students, unlike their direct entry peers, recognise that there are a lot of challenges/sophistication involved in effective group work and group dynamics: they don't just want to be left to their own devices to figure stuff out, which can translate into all sorts of unhelpful scenarios and a negative experience of group work that might impact on how students view 'collaboration' in future. It sounds like in wanting more resources in groupwork, these students seem to be saying they want to learn how to do it well.

Next steps and additional questions

Future research opportunities also exist regarding explicitly exploring the integration of group work skills for all students into the curriculum rather than just outsourcing group work to learning development teams as a one-off session. The academics, hopefully, have a working relationship with their students, have hopefully built up some trust and knowledge, and could then use that to move beyond 'generic' group work to looking at how group work plays out in the specific subject discipline and within a specific cohort. It would be great to see group work being broken down into components like self-awareness, being a team player, facilitation, negotiation, conflict resolution, task management, adaptability and so on, and to have these components then integrated into the curriculum in creative and meaningful ways, adopting the resources developed, referring to it their sessions, and adding some subject specific/professional context for their particular cohorts.

Authors' reflection

Rachel: When we decided to present at ALDCon, it was to raise awareness that there may be demand for tailored resources for mature students and to share the contribution of the University of Leeds Mature Student Advisory Board. We were also interested in hearing about experiences of working with mature students at other institutions, so I particularly valued the comments and insights during our panel, notably the awareness of research about podcasts in mature student education, which I look forward to reading. I was also pleased to hear that creating tailored resources for mature students seemed valuable to colleagues in other institutions and welcome conversations about this in the future, but agree with the comments above that research into integrating group work into the

curriculum would be valuable. In collaboration with a colleague working in educational development at Leeds, future work aims to do just that through a staff community of practice and a toolkit of resources.

Anthony: The community responses to our presentation of the Mature Student Skills Resource were both reassuring and insightful, offering useful perspectives on the benefits and challenges both of the resource itself and on the wider projects and collaborations that it relates to. I was particularly encouraged by the community's appreciation of our honest appraisal of the difficulties that we experienced throughout the project: although I have been focused on fixing the problems within the resource itself, the respondents rightly highlight that it is important not to rush past or simply forget about such problems, as openly sharing and reflecting on them 'gives others the opportunity to learn from your own experience as they look to replicate your work'.

Suzy: I have learned many things as a result of being involved in this project, one being that mature students represent a diverse cohort in terms of age and experience, which made tailoring a skills resource to meet their unique needs particularly challenging. Therefore, I was pleased that the community reflection recognised our efforts in attempting to create a generic resource that is nevertheless respectful of the diverse experiences of the mature student population. I also found the comments relating to mature students' recognition of the complexities of successful group working particularly insightful. I hope that in future, we are able to develop the resource and continue our work to integrate group working skills into the curriculum so that it meets the needs of specific disciplinary cohorts.

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Anthony Warde has been a Digital Learning Advisor at University of Leeds since 2022, supporting the faculties of Engineering and Environment, as well as Leeds Business School. He is also jointly responsible for the maintenance and ongoing development of the library's Academic Skills webpages and for the creation of new interactive learning objects and online resources. Prior to joining Leeds, he worked at the Department for Lifelong Learning at the University of Sheffield, working with mature students on part-time and full-time integrated degree pathways in the humanities.

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