



OfS and mature students' access and participation

Issue

1. The OfS' response to the decline in mature students' access and participation in higher education.

Recommendations

2. The board is invited to:
 - a. Note the nature of the decline in mature students' access and participation in higher education (detailed in Annex A).
 - b. Note that the financing of mature students and part-time study in higher education is a priority for the post-18 review.
 - c. Advise on the ways in which OfS should be active to address the decline in mature students' access and participation, taking into account our regulatory levers and the activity currently underway.
 - d. Advise on the most important priorities for our work, given the limited resources available to us.

Further information

3. Available from Chris Millward, Director of Fair Access and Participation (0117 9317448, chris.millward@officeforstudents.org.uk) or Ruth Tucker (0117 931 7367, ruth.tucker@officeforstudents.org.uk).

Members' interests

4. Individual board members should declare any conflicts of interest in relation to this paper.

Background

5. This paper considers the nature of the decline in mature students' participation in higher education, and explores options for our response in relation to the OfS's functions and powers, set out in our regulatory framework, and reflected in our strategy.
6. The fall in mature students' participation in higher education is primarily among part-time students, the majority of whom are mature and have a qualification aim other than a full degree, though the decline affects most part-time qualifications. Previous studies have attributed the decline to a broad range of interlinked economic and policy decisions, none of which had the intention of having this affect¹. Annex A provides further analysis of the patterns in mature student participation, extending from access to continuation and graduate outcomes, and details of further work that OfS is undertaking to understand potential adult demand for higher education.
7. The current Review of Post-18 Education and Funding, which is expected to report in autumn of this year, has identified flexible learning and supporting people to study at different times in their lives as one of its priorities. It can, therefore, be expected to make specific recommendations about how the student finance system could best support this. As a result of the review, there is considerable scrutiny of mature and part-time learning currently. For example, the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee has highlighted that market based reforms since 2012-13 have incentivised the recruitment of young students², a Universities UK project is developing recommendations on how to support flexible learning at different points in life³ and the House of Lords recently debated part-time and continuing education, and the future of the Open University' (5 July 2018)⁴.
8. While OfS should be cognisant of the Government's response to the Review's interim and final reports, as it may have a profound influence on patterns of demand and provision, we believe that we need to consider the interventions we could make to address the decline in mature students' access and participation, given its importance to our duties and strategy.

Strategic context

9. Our approach to regulation is underpinned by the general duties and powers of the Higher Education and Research Act, 2017 (Section 2). The Regulatory framework sets out how we intend to perform these functions, including a primary objective to support access, success and progression for students from all backgrounds⁵. In order to deliver on this, we need to take into account the needs of potential and current students who cannot or do not want to access higher education when they are young. For this reason, our business plan for 2018-19 (financial year) identifies mature students' access and participation as a priority for our access and participation work and we have identified reversing the decline in mature student participation as a priority for access and participation plans. In doing so, we have taken into account specific government guidance.

¹ HEFCE (2014/08d) Pressure from all sides: Economic and policy influences on part-time higher education

² Treating Students Fairly: The Economics of Post-school Education (11 June 2018), House of Lords, Economic Affairs Committee

³ Universities UK: The Economic case for flexible learning in higher education

⁴ House of Lords debate on Part-time and continuing education, 5 July 2018

⁵ OfS (February 2018) Securing student success: Regulatory framework for higher education in England

10. The guidance on access and participation asks us⁶:
 - a. 'to maintain a focus on flexible provision including part-time study
 - b. to encourage providers to consider the recruitment and support of mature learners
 - c. to encourage providers to work in partnerships with employers to ensure degree apprenticeships widen access to professions and that people of all ages, ability, backgrounds and disadvantaged areas are represented.'
11. The overall guidance to OfS complements this, advising OfS 'to be bold in its operation of the [regulatory] framework, explicitly supporting diverse, innovative approaches and models of provision', and also to support the government's industrial strategy priorities, which include regional productivity and graduate-level skills.
12. The levers we have available to deliver on this include:
 - a. regulation of access and participation plans, for which providers need approval if they intend to charge above the undergraduate fee to home/EU students.
 - b. regulation of quality conditions, within which we take into account the outcomes for mature students, and the Teaching Excellence Framework, which identifies excellence beyond the quality baseline.
 - c. use of funding, which can incentivise providers in relation to flexible provision attractive to mature and part-time students, as well as supporting innovation and effective practice
 - d. removal of barriers to new providers and modes of provision such as accelerated degrees
 - e. provision of information, advice and guidance to students
 - f. influence across government, for example in relation to the post-18 review, higher level and degree apprenticeships, and the industrial strategy.

Discussion

13. We would like advice from the board on how best to deploy these levers to address the mature student decline, giving particular consideration to the activities below.

Access and participation plans and funding

14. We are currently reviewing our approach to access and participation plans and our funding in this area, with the aim of:
 - a. achieving a significant reduction in the gaps in access, success and progression over the next five years, shifting from incremental to transformational change
 - b. regulating and funding access and participation consistently with the wider OfS regulatory approach, making it outcome-based, risk-based, underpinned by evidence and joined up with other regulatory activities.
15. We will present recommendations to the board on this at its meeting in November 2018, enabling implementation from spring 2019 for the 2020-21 round of plans and funding. At this interim stage of the review, the board is invited to advise on the following issues:

⁶ Access and Participation: Secretary of State for Education, Guidance to the OfS, DfE, February 2018

- a. should we expect all providers to engage in activity to support mature students through their access and participation plans and include targets on this, or should individual providers be able to determine whether this fits with their mission?
- b. should we provide funding, as now, for all providers who recruit mature students in order to reflect the particular challenges of supporting them or should our funding be focused more tightly to reward those that set and achieve the most challenging targets in this area?
- c. should we seek to drive particular types of provision through our regulation of access and participation plans and our funding, for example incentivising sub-degree and shorter cycle provision, accelerated degrees, higher level and degree apprenticeships, or provision that supplies particular skills in sectors and places?
- d. should mature students be positioned more centrally within HE outreach that we regulate and fund, including the National Collaborative Outreach Programme?

Measuring performance in relation to part-time and mature students

16. In the TEF Year 2 exercise, problems were identified in relation to the assessment of part-time provision, which is pursued by a high proportion of mature students, such that changes were made for Year 3. Providers with a substantial proportion of part-time provision (where it is the majority or accounts for at least 35 per cent of the provider's students by headcount) may now submit an additional page of quantitative information, the purpose of which is to supplement the continuation, employment and further study and highly skilled employment metrics.
17. We have also developed a discrete continuation measure for part-time students who are studying for less than a full degree, which will help to fill the evidence gap. This will be tested in TEF Year 4 with a view to implementation in Year 5.
18. A problem remains in relation to benchmarking providers with part-time provision, given the dominance of the Open University among the overall student profile.
19. Alongside this, the POLAR measure that is used to understand higher education participation applies to young students and the government has used this to identify its ambition for improving access. Given our interest in all students and our specific concerns in relation to mature student participation, we are developing a Working Age Participation Index, which will enable participation to be understood across the age ranges. Our preliminary work on the Index suggests that the decline in mature student participation is lower once the increase in the overall population who now have a higher education qualification is taken into account.

Recommendation: The board is invited to note these developments and to advise on any further steps we should take to improve our understanding of the mature student population and HE providers' performance in relation to it.

Higher level skills and employer related activity

20. At its meeting in May, the board agreed measures to address the People priorities within the Industrial Strategy, which are focussed on specific skills, places, provision and ways of working with employers, using the functions and powers set out in the regulatory framework and the student focused priorities in our strategy.

21. As a result of this, we are developing plans for activity to:
 - a. understand skills gaps and future needs
 - b. support an increase in graduates skilled in industrial strategy priority areas of STEM provision
 - c. encourage employer involvement in higher education
 - d. address regional disparities in skills and productivity.

22. Development work we are conducting on degree apprenticeships, which will report in the autumn, has identified that they are a powerful route for employers to invest in the skills development of their current staff. There are, though, barriers to their take-up currently, which relate to the time required to secure regulatory approval of apprenticeship standards relative to employers' expected timescales for working, and the current policy of the Institute for Apprenticeships to de-couple degree qualifications from many degree-level apprenticeships. De-coupling has the effect of removing a portable qualification for the individual student, removing funding from HE providers for an element of higher education activity they would normally consider to be central, and removing our regulatory responsibility for the quality of the activity, with consequences for the standing of both the apprenticeships and degree brand.

Recommendation: Given the potential of degree apprenticeships to provide a route for mature student participation, as well as attracting young learners who are currently under-represented in HE, the board is invited to agree that we should engage actively within DfE and with the Institute of Apprenticeships to address the barriers to the development and uptake of degree apprenticeships arising from the de-coupling of qualifications, including developing proposals for the regulation of activity that is identified as degree-level but does not include a qualification.

Nursing, midwifery and allied health disciplines

23. Nursing, midwifery and allied health (NMAH) disciplines account for 5.5 per cent of the student population in England, and just over 21 per cent of the over 25 population (HESA 2015-16). There has been a decline in NMAH studies among mature students following the changes to financing through loans for tuition fees and maintenance in 2017-18.

24. OfS uses teaching funding grant to support this provision through high cost subject funding, and also a targeted supplement for NMAH preregistration courses⁷. We are also devoting £1m per year from 2017-18 to a three-year programme to support Strategic Interventions in Health Education Disciplines, which is focused on promoting studies in therapeutic radiography, podiatry, orthoptics, prosthetics and orthotics and delivered in collaboration with the professional bodies. The interventions include:
 - a. the development of online and traditional marketing materials and communications campaign (addressing young and mature audiences) for all four disciplines
 - b. outreach and communications officers for all four disciplines
 - c. a Challenge Fund project in which higher education providers pilot innovative ways of recruitment or delivery of programmes in podiatry and therapeutic radiography
 - d. work shadowing opportunities in orthoptics

⁷ See 'Guide to Funding 2018-19: How the OfS allocates money to higher education providers', May 2018, OfS for further information on funding.

- e. funding of a fixed term role to increase the capacity for work placements, and to coordinate the development of apprenticeship standards for prosthetics and orthotics.
25. Alongside this, we have commissioned research into the barriers to mature student participation in healthcare disciplines and how to address them. The report, due in the autumn, will include three regional case studies, alongside recommendations for higher education providers.

Recommendation: The board is invited to advise on whether there are other steps we should take to support mature student participation in healthcare disciplines?

New providers and flexible provision

26. Among established providers the Open University (for distance learning) and Birkbeck, University of London (for evening courses) are among the largest providers for mature students whose preference is for the flexibility offered by part-time provision. Many other universities and further education colleges have some flexible provision attracting mature and part-time students. We are aware that some new providers have very high proportions of mature students, reflecting their missions and business models, and we might expect the number of such providers and the volume of their students to grow as they become part of the OfS regulated sector. Figures 6-7 in Annex A illustrate these splits in provision and students across the different types of provider in 2016-17.

Recommendation: The board is invited to advise on whether we should treat the large providers like any others or are there particular considerations we need to take into account in relation to student choice, access and participation?

'Bridging provision'

27. Bridging provision refers to courses designed to provide academic preparation for higher education study for adults who, because of social, educational or individual circumstances, may have achieved few, if any, prior qualifications. Many further education colleges (and some universities) offer the Access to Higher Education Diploma, for which there is provision for tuition fee debt to be waived in the event of successful completion of a higher education programme. Many HE providers also offer accredited foundation year courses (sometimes referred to as year zero), and short/part-time HE taster accredited courses that are particularly appropriate for mature students.
28. In 2018-19, we will continue to provide a grant of £251,000 to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) to support its work in regulating this activity through a recognition scheme for Access Validating Agencies (AVAs). This provides the confidence in the courses necessary to secure admission to HE providers and the tuition fee debt waiver. Current data suggests that:
- a. 87 per cent of students with an Access to HE Diploma were aged over 21 in 2016-17
 - b. health, public service and care subjects comprise over half (53 per cent) of Diploma registrations in 2016-17
 - c. entrants across all subjects have fallen by 10 per cent (38,025 in 2016-17, down from 42,405 the previous year)

- d. entrants on nursing and other healthcare related Access to HE Diplomas have fallen by 18 per cent (20,050 in 2016-17, down from 24,346 the previous year).

Recommendation: We are currently reviewing our grant funding for this in the context of the broader landscape of level 3 bridging provision. This may also be an area of interest for the post-18 review. In order to inform these two strands of work, the board is invited to advise on whether OfS should actively seek to promote bridging courses to support choice and participation for mature students, or we should expect this activity to be secured through the market alone.

Information, advice and guidance (IAG) strategy

29. We are developing the OfS strategy for information, advice and guidance for publication in 2019. This work is considering what support and resources are currently available at all stages of the student cycle, how effectively this meets the needs of prospective students and their advisers, and where the OfS can best add value to existing resources and activities in line with its role. The strategy will also consider the needs of different student groups, particularly those who may be disadvantaged in terms of access to good quality impartial information, advice and guidance.
30. As part of the strategy development, we are considering specifically whether there are IAG gaps in relation to mature students, and part-time and flexible study, and how these might be addressed. Existing research (commissioned for a review conducted by HEFCE in 2015) highlights that students interested in more flexible learning pathways use more limited sources of information and are more likely to prioritise information about practical factors such as course costs, location and timetabling to enable them to assess if study is realistic. Their information choices are often constrained by existing commitments (family, financing and employment), which narrows the HE choices available to them⁸.
31. Building on this research, we will deepen our understanding of student perspectives but also the challenges and drivers experienced by organisations providing comparable information and metrics on highly flexible programmes to consider how information sources can reflect the diversity of programmes and providers.

Recommendation: The board is invited to note the prominence of mature students within our IAG strategy development and to advise on any specific steps we should take in relation to mature students.

Innovation Challenge Fund

32. The board will consider in a separate paper the use of the Innovation Challenge Fund to support innovation and drive effective practice sector-wide. If the Board agrees to proceed with the Fund, we would consider the development of a programme to stimulate innovative approaches to addressing the decline in mature student participation, for example projects to:
 - a. promote mature and part-time students' participation using randomised controlled trials or quasi-experimental methods, in partnership with the Behavioural Insights Team –

⁸ See the research from the HEFCE review of information about learning and teaching and the student experience, 2015

which conducts innovative work to support individuals to make better choices for themselves – higher education providers and the third sector⁹

- b. align provision with local skills strategies and work with employers to support the progression of adults in the workforce
- c. develop new models of flexible provision that respond to the needs of mature and part-time students, for example using social learning platforms, credit accumulation and supporting the transition from informal to formal learning.

Recommendation: The Board is invited to advise on whether mature student participation should be a priority for the Innovation Challenge Fund.

Resource implications

- 33. The activity identified in this paper extends across all directorates, but is co-ordinated within the Fair Access and Participation directorate
- 34. We have made provision for the resources needed for current work-strands, but discrete provision would be needed for any additional activity.

Communications and engagement

- 35. We will develop a communications strategy, including publication on the OfS website of our approach and interventions to addressing the decline in mature students access and participation. We will advertise any new activity through our admin-ofs mailing list and social media, and we will use blogs and social media to highlight results, dissemination activities, impacts and outcomes.

Risk implications

- 36. The major risk that we have identified is that our levers combined with selective interventions may be insufficient to make a real difference in the medium to long term, particularly in relation to any changes that may arise through the post-18 review.
- 37. Our mitigation for this is that we will ourselves seek to influence the post-18 review and to develop our activities in a way that will complement any developments in this area. We also believe that our regulatory activity in relation to access and participation will be sustained regardless of the review outcomes.

Paper publication date

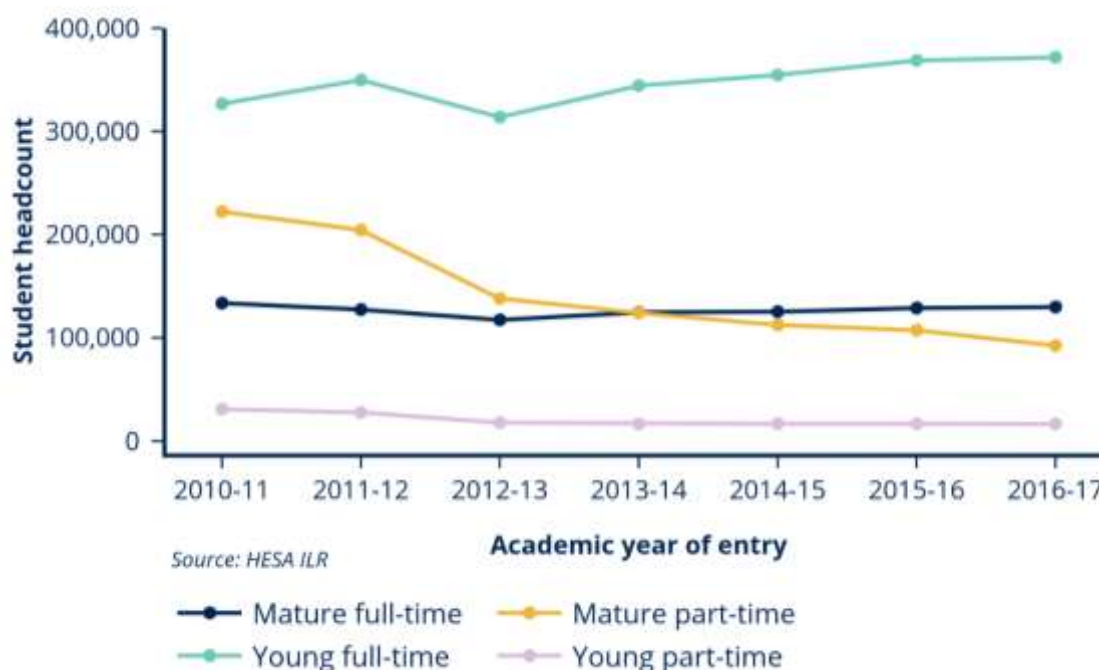
- 38. Subject to the board's agreement of this paper, it should not be published according to our standard publication procedures. Rather, publication should be withheld until the paper concerning the reviews (access and participation plans, funding and NCOP) from 27 November meeting is published.

⁹ The Behavioural Insights Team objectives include 'enabling people to make "better choices for themselves"'.

Data analysis concerning mature students' access and participation in relation to economic and public policy

1. Our analysis of data begins with an overview of trends of all undergraduate entrants (young, mature, full and part-time) 2010-11 to 2016-17 in England (Figure 1). The biggest decline is in mature part-time study, steepest early in the time series, (evident from 2008-09) and extending across the period. There is a slight decline in young part-time, while mature full-time shows little change when comparing 2010-11 to 2016-17. In 2002-03 almost half of all entrants to higher education were on part-time courses.

Figure 1: Undergraduate entrants by age and mode of study 2010-11 to 2016-17



2. Part-time higher education has seen substantial falls in undergraduate entrants, The HEFCE study (2014) that first drew attention to the substantial fall in undergraduate entrants attributed it to a broad range of interlinked economic and policy decisions, which have continued¹⁰.
3. These include:
 - the reduction in funding for equivalent and lower qualifications (ELQ) since 2008-09
 - the end of HEFCE's workforce development programme (2008-09 to 2011-12), focussed on employer co-funded students, the majority of whom were part-time
 - loan and maintenance changes for part-time students from (2012-13)
4. Loan and maintenance changes for part-time students (from 2012-13) involved increased tuition fees (pro rata to the increase in full-time fees), which aimed to reduce the deficit in public finances. While potentially this fee increase might have been offset by part-time tuition fee loans, eligibility for a loan was limited to students:

¹⁰ HEFCE (2014/08d) Pressure from all sides: Economic and policy influences on part-time higher education

- aiming for a qualification that is not an equivalent or lower than one they already hold (with certain exemptions)
 - studying at an intensity greater than 25 per cent of the full-time equivalent
 - aiming for a specified qualification i.e. not studying individual modules for credits.
5. Nick Hillman a former special adviser to David Willetts (the universities minister responsible for the fees and funding reforms introduced 2012-13) has stated "We didn't understand how few part-time students would actually be entitled to those loans"¹¹
 6. Since 2012-13 part-time students have been ineligible for government maintenance loans or grants, although means tested part-time maintenance loans will become available from 2018-19 with a number of qualification aims: BA, BSc, BEd, Integrated Master's, Foundation Degree, Certification of Higher Education, Diploma of Higher education, HNC, HND, initial teacher training. However, this has the similar eligibility criteria to the fee loan thereby excluding some part-time students.
 7. Claire Callender and John Thompson have investigated the decline in part-time study over the past decade with a focus on the impact of the 2012-13 student funding reforms¹². While the study welcomes the part-time loans they argue that more loans will not have a great impact, not least because of the debt aversion and price sensitivity of students ineligible for a loan deciding not to study.
 8. HND/HNC has the smallest decline in mature students' participation (Table 1). The decline is greatest for foundation degrees and other undergraduate (OUG). Subsequent analysis (Figures 2-4) focusses on OUG, the largest mature part-time population¹³.

Table 1: Undergraduate part-time mature entrants by qualification aim 2010-11 to 2016-17

UG qualification aim	2010-11	2016-17	Percentage difference (2010-11 to 2016-17)
First degree	53,975	30,380	-44%
Foundation degree	16,590	5,645	-66%
HND / HNC	6,045	6,005	-1%
Undergraduate diploma	3,615	1,660	-54%
Other undergraduate (OUG)	142,025	48,715	-66%
TOTAL	222,250	92,400	-58%

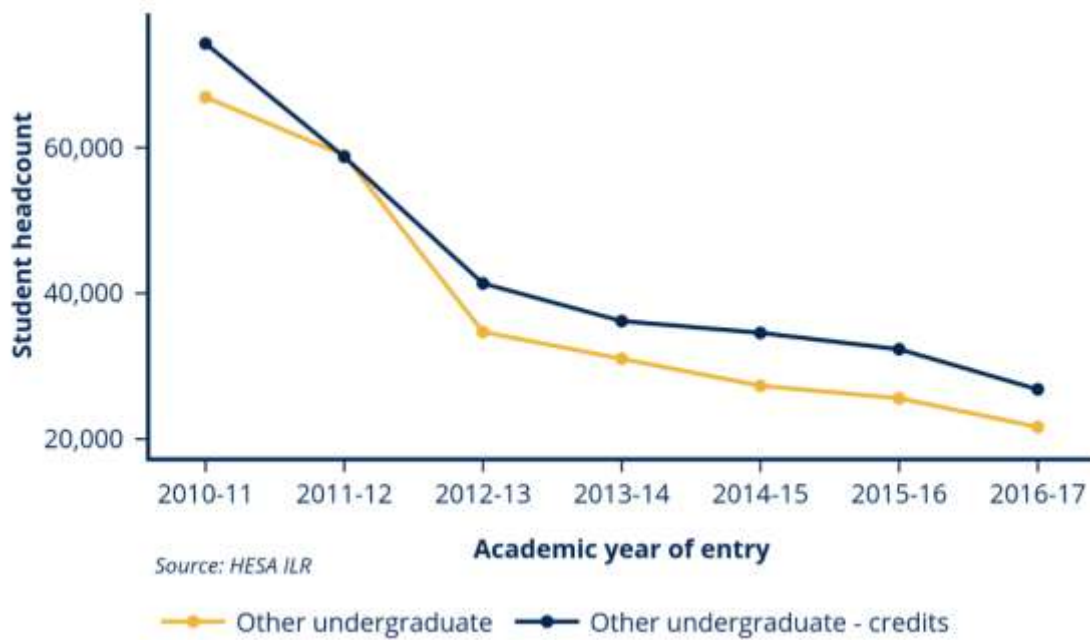
9. Within the OUG group, there are courses that award students credits and others that award a full qualification. Credits either stand alone or are counted towards a full qualification at the appropriate level. The decline across the two groups is similar 2012-13 to 2016-17 (Figure 2).

¹¹ The Guardian, Part-time student numbers collapse by 56% in five years, 2 May 2017

¹² Claire Callender and John Thompson: The Lost Part-timers: The decline of part-time undergraduate higher education in England, March 2018, The Sutton Trust

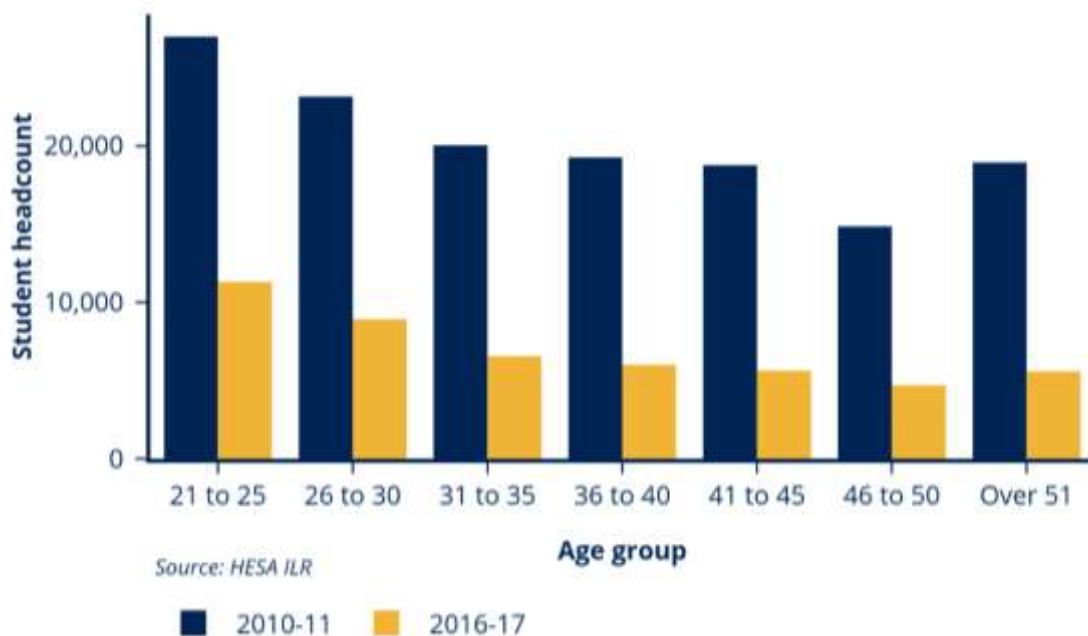
¹³ OUG includes certificates, diplomas and professional qualifications.

Figure 2: Undergraduate part-time mature students entering other undergraduate courses by study type 2010-11 to 2016-17



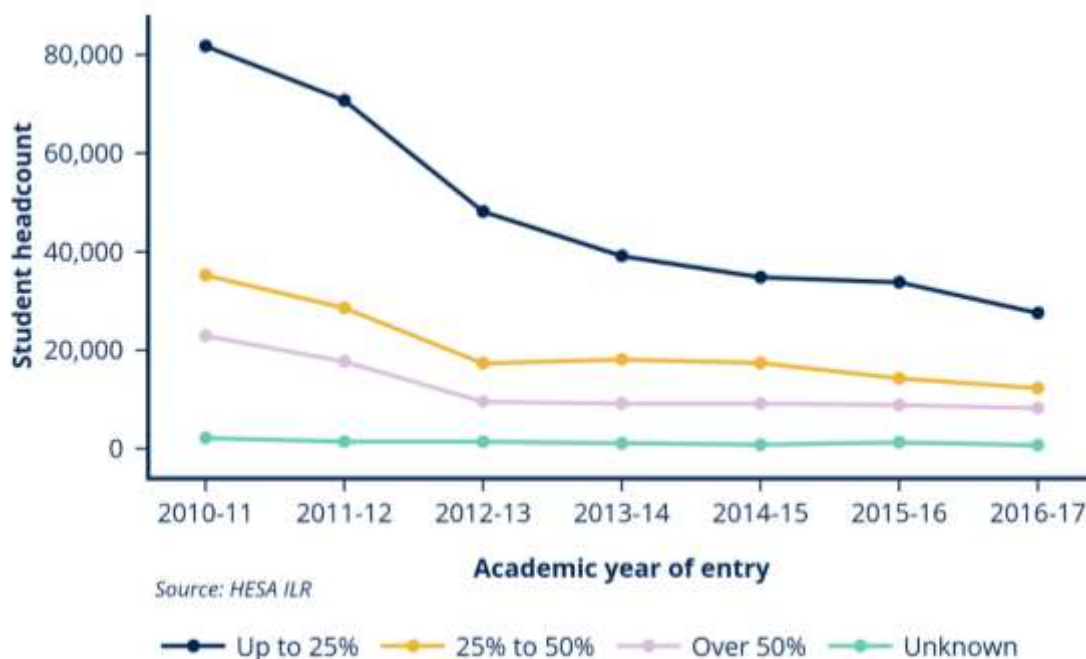
10. The mature population includes a broad age range, and while we might have expected some differences in behaviour between age groups, the decline in part-time higher education for OUG is similar across all groups comparing 2010-11 to 2016-17 (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Undergraduate part-time mature students entering other undergraduate courses by age group 2010-11 to 2016-17



11. Intensity measures the course as a proportion of an equivalent full-time course, and within part-time higher education there is some variation. The decline in mature entrants to part-time courses is most prevalent for courses with an intensity of study under 25 per cent. There may be a correlation between this and the ineligibility of such students for loan support (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Undergraduate part-time mature students entering other undergraduate courses by intensity of study 2010-11 to 2016-17

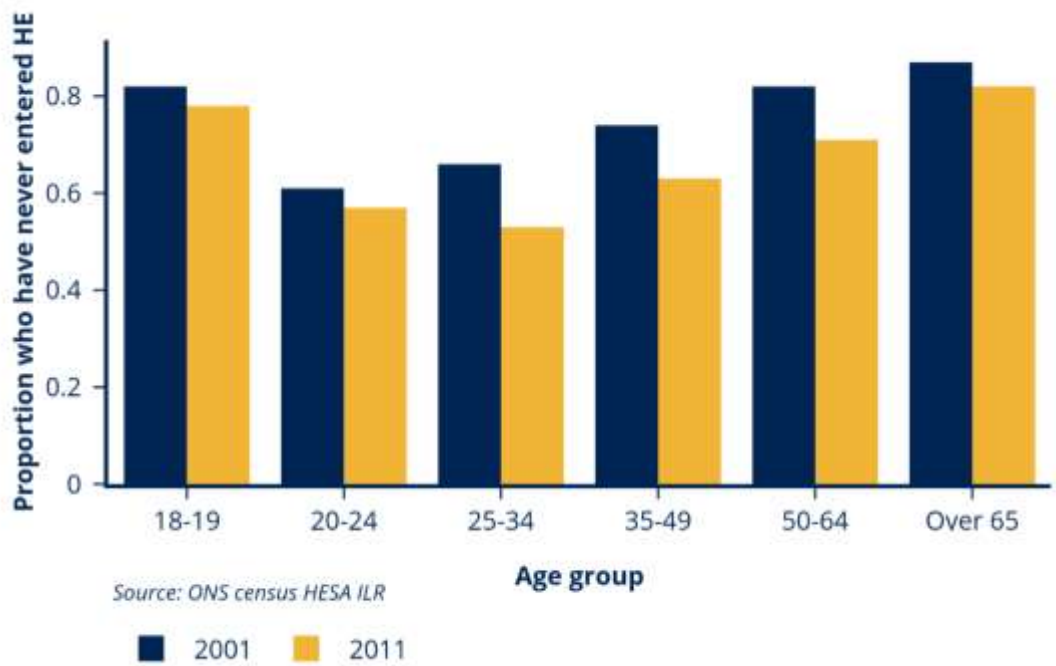


12. The non-continuation rate after the first year of study is higher for mature students as compared to young students, and mature students are less likely to transfer¹⁴. The non-continuation rate for male mature students is higher than for females.
13. The majority of mature students have 'other level 3' as their entry qualification. With regard to degree outcomes mature students achievement of first or upper second class degree was slightly lower than that for young students (67 per cent mature and 79 per cent young in 2016-17).
14. A higher proportion of mature graduates are in highly skilled employment or further study six months after graduation compared to young (77 per cent and 73 per cent respectively in 2016-17).

¹⁴ Non-continuation rates and transfers, Data and analysis, OfS website

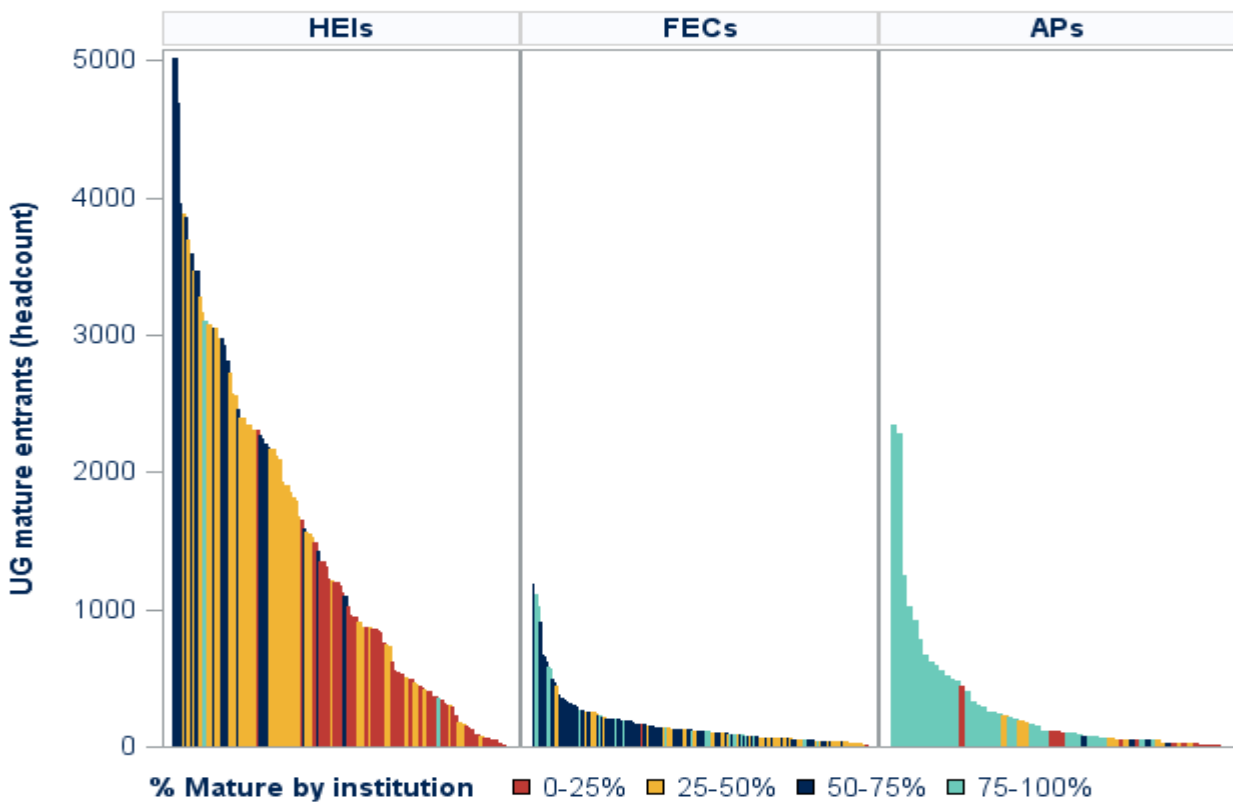
15. While mature students' participation has been in decline since 2008-09, it is unclear whether this decline correlates with increasing numbers of adults without a higher education qualification who may potentially want to access higher education, if the 'right' opportunity was available, for example in relation to affordability and flexibility of provision.
16. The proportion of the age groups who have never entered higher education declined between the two census years across all groups (Figure 5). Therefore demand for higher education would be expected to decline for adults, as more of the population entered higher education in 2011 compared to 2001. Further analysis underway will estimate the changing size of these groups since 2011 compared to actual participation rates in each year.

Figure 5: Proportion of census respondents, 2001 and 2011, without a higher education qualification by age



17. Figure 6 provides a snapshot of 2016-17 data for undergraduate entrants (all domiciles) for all English higher education providers with more than 50 students; this analysis uses a different population to the previous time series analysis. Figure 6 excludes the Open University, which constitutes 9 per cent of the total undergraduate mature population (21,935), as it cannot be displayed easily alongside the other providers.
18. Figure 6 shows institutional reliance on the mature population by type of provider: higher education institution (HEI), further education college (FEC) and 'alternative' provider (AP). While 4 out of 5 mature students study at an HEI, the mix of students is not heavily reliant on the mature population. Whereas for further education colleges and 'alternative' providers, which have a smaller proportion of the mature student market, mature students make up a larger proportion of their undergraduate entrant population.

Figure 6: Undergraduate mature entrant headcount by institution and grouped by reliance on mature students within total undergraduate entrants for 2016-17



19. Figure 7 shows institutional summaries and considers the reliance on part-time students within the undergraduate entrant population. This shows that higher education institutions with large mature populations tend to have a larger reliance on part-time students. This is not so in further education colleges and 'alternative' providers, which might suggest differences in the provision offered by smaller providers, compared to higher education institutions (where 87 per cent of part-time students study).

Figure 7: Undergraduate mature entrant headcount by institution and grouped by reliance on part-time students within total undergraduate entrants for 2016-17

