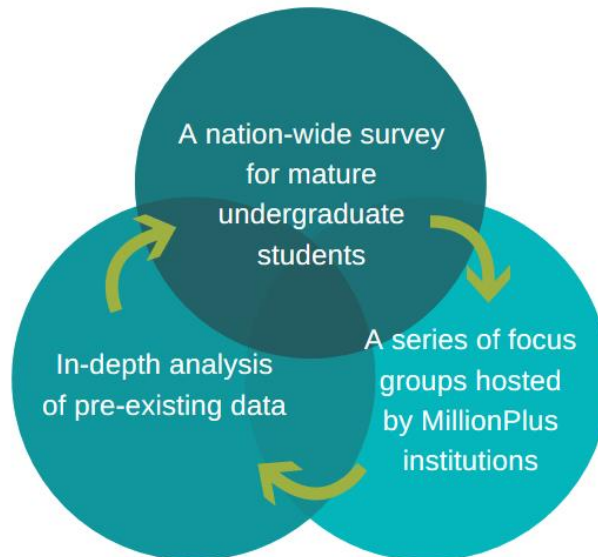


## Report summary

### **FORGOTTEN LEARNERS: BUILDING A SYSTEM THAT WORKS FOR MATURE STUDENTS**

This report contributes to a richer understanding of the contemporary mature student experience and provides a detailed analysis of changing mature student numbers. The research consisted of three principal components:



Mature students represent a diverse group within higher education. So diverse that mature students themselves have referred to different groups or “generations” of students within the same institution. But there are common characteristics of mature student life: existing professional commitments; caring responsibilities; extra financial burden; a marked motivation for study; type of residence while at university; manner of application to university.

Recent years have seen a worrying decline in mature student numbers, with a 20% fall across the UK between 2011/12 and 2016/17. There were 122,060 fewer mature students in England in 2016/17 as there were in 2011/12. Three areas have been identified in which the decline in mature students has been most heavily concentrated: those studying part-time; the “30 and over” age group; those studying “other” degrees.

The decline in mature student numbers has disproportionately affected certain courses. Between 2009/10 and 2016/17, the number of part-time mature nursing students fell by 49%.

According to the most recent census data, around **20 million** of the UK's working population did not have level 4 qualifications or above. To put that into perspective, the total number of 18 -year olds was just over three quarters of a million at the last count. Mature learners represent a huge pool of untapped potential across the UK.

Modern universities have a key role to play in any such agenda. This report focuses on some of the cultural, social and economic arguments for a healthy mature student population, which merit the attention of those both inside and outside of higher education.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

### Government should:

- Review student finance to assess whether there is adequate financial support for those with the lowest household incomes.
- Improve the financial support available for mature students so that those who are most disadvantaged are not having to rely on high levels of paid employment to maintain themselves financially, thereby damaging their ability to progress at university.
- Restore maintenance grants for students in England through the Student Loans Company so that mature students are not discouraged from entering higher education due to maintenance costs and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do not graduate with greater levels of debt
- Further relax the equivalent and lower qualifications (ELQ) restrictions for some 'second-chance' learners
- Establish a system of tuition fee loan write-off for nursing and midwifery students in England (post-2016) after a minimum period of public service e.g. 5 years. This will help combat problems with both recruitment and retention in these professions.
- Maximise the flexibility of learning options in higher education so that mature students are not discouraged from going to university. Move to a more flexible system that allows students to tailor their study to the pace of their life and makes university education feasible for those with existing commitments. This must be replicated on the level of funding, to create a system in which mature students do not have to commit to a full year's worth of financial and personal commitment

### The Office for Students should:

- Prioritise mature students as a key target demographic within the widening participation agenda.
- Use its powers as a regulator to secure meaningful, sustained and stretching commitments from universities in their Access and Participation Plans in relation to mature students.
- Encourage and incentivise universities to design effective approaches to mature student recruitment and to expand funding for that recruitment and for financial support.

### Universities should:

- Further improve engagement with mature students to acknowledge their diversity and establish spaces/opportunities on campus for mature students to meet each other, particularly those in similar age brackets.
- Continue to provide flexible routes into higher education.
- Ensure there is adequate support for students with caring responsibilities, so that these do not act as a barrier to entry or completion.
- Avoid any changes to term timetables that may increase childcare costs for mature students.
- Be bold in targets and ambitions outlined in Access and Participation Plans relating to mature students.
- Promote the range of support (financial or otherwise) that is available to mature students.